The Rural Educator

Volume 45 | Number 2 Article 3

Spring 2024

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Recommended Citation

Belansky, E. S., Diaz Solodukhin, L., Edelman, A., Hobbs, S., Hazel, C., & Cutforth, N. (2024). Strategies to Recruit and Retain the Rural School Mental Health Workforce. *The Rural Educator, 45*(2), 32-43. https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1375

Strategies to Recruit and Retain the Rural School Mental Health Workforce

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Research Article

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The United States is experiencing a teacher shortage crisis that is even more pronounced in rural communities. Teachers may be driven away from the profession if they feel inadequately trained or under-supported to address students' mental health needs. As such, an important teacher retention strategy is to ensure schools have enough mental health professionals. The goal of this study was to explore three different yet complementary strategies to recruit and retain a robust rural school mental health workforce: a rural immersion program for graduate students enrolled in counseling and school psychology programs, a virtual professional development series for existing rural school mental health professionals, and a workforce hiring strategy. Each strategy showed promise: six out of seven students stated they were more inclined to work in a rural setting as a result of the immersion, self-efficacy and job satisfaction significantly increased for rural school mental health professionals participating in the virtual professional development, and important recruitment strategies were identified by rural school leaders. While there is reason for optimism when it comes to creating a robust rural school mental health workforce, funds are urgently needed to make these strategies available to rural communities across the country.

The number of U.S. teachers planning to leave the education profession continues to rise at an alarming pace. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 6 teachers reported plans to leave. That number rose to 1 in 4 just one year into the pandemic (Steiner & Woo, 2021). By 2022, this figure rose even higher; 55% of educators reporting intentions to leave or retire sooner than planned (Doan et al., 2022). Compared to other working adults, teachers and principals report higher levels of frequent job-related stress, burnout, symptoms of depression, and not coping well with job-related stress (Steiner et al., 2022). They also report lower levels of resilience. Educators identify several COVID-related stressors such as worries about their own health, having to juggle working from home while taking care of their own children, and needing to use remote instruction while navigating technological glitches (Steiner & Woo, 2021). This shortage is more pronounced in rural communities and is expected to worsen by 2025 due to unique teacher recruitment and retention challenges, such as lower salaries and geographic isolation (Cole et al., 2017; García & Weiss, 2019; Maranto & Shuls, 2013). The shortage of qualified teachers, high rates of teacher turnover, and high attrition rates are associated with less teacher effectiveness, lower student ability to learn, and poorer student academic achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). The time it takes to replace teachers also presents a substantial cost to rural school leaders. A study in rural Alaska showed that, on average, hiring and training one new rural teacher took approximately 81.7 hours of a superintendent's time (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). Thus, identifying successful strategies to recruit and retain teachers in rural settings is essential.

Literature Review

Teachers are more likely to stay in their positions if they receive support from school administrators. Teacher retention also increases when their school has fewer student discipline issues. Oftentimes, these behavioral challenges are the result of untreated student mental health needs (Child Mind Institute, 2016; Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers may be driven away from the profession when they feel inadequately trained or under-supported to address students' mental health needs (Glover et al., 2016). As such, one teacher retention strategy school administrators can employ is to ensure schools are sufficiently staffed with mental health professionals.

School mental health professionals (such as school psychologists, social workers, and counselors)

have the potential to provide essential support to teachers, students, and families, such as assessment, consultation with families and school personnel, coordinating services and interventions, linking to community resources, providing counseling services, and supporting all students' social emotional development (NASP, 2014; American School Counselor Association, n.d.). These supports in turn could increase teacher retention.

The United States (US), however, is facing a school mental health professional shortage. Depending on the model, the US needs 8,220–57,490 more full-time clinical, counseling, and school psychologists by 2025 (Health Resources and Services Administration/National Center for Health Workforce Analysis & Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/ Office of Policy, Planning, and Innovation, 2015). The school mental health workforce shortage is particularly concerning for rural communities given their higher rates of youth and adult mental and behavioral challenges (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Robinson, 2017). These unmet mental health needs put additional pressure on rural schools that are already contending with a teacher workforce suffering from high levels of stress and depression, staffing shortages, collegial isolation, reliance on uncertified teachers, and compensation disparities (Showalter et al., 2019; Steiner & Woo, 2021). In rural California, for example, challenges that superintendents identified included inadequate school mental health resources, such as lack of school mental health support staff, lack of community mental health service partners, budget constraints, and competing priorities (O'Malley et al., 2018).

Most of what is known about recruitment and retention strategies pertains to teachers rather than school mental health professionals. These strategies include providing higher salaries and bonuses, scholarships and loan forgiveness, improved administrative support and leadership, and teacher support programs (Hare & Heap, 2001; Tran & Dou, 2019). Additional strategies, such as providing a common planning time and team or interdisciplinary teaching, are known to support teacher retention, but small rural schools are less likely to implement those strategies (Hare & Heap, 2001). Other strategies that support rural teacher recruitment and retention include pre-service immersion programs in which future teachers spend a concentrated period living and teaching in a rural community and receiving professional development (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Munsch & Boylan, 2008; Wood et al., 2013). It is unclear, however, if these teacher recruitment and retention strategies could also work for school mental health professionals—empirical studies are needed.

Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools

To tackle the teacher workforce shortage and support meaningful partnerships among institutions of higher education and school districts, in 2018 the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) launched the Plan Into Action funding opportunity. The Center for Rural School Health & Education (CRSHE) at the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education received a Plan Into Action grant to create a robust school mental health workforce as a strategy to retain rural teachers in Colorado. The argument was that if more school mental health professionals were available in rural schools to meet student mental health needs, teachers would feel more supported and be more likely to remain in their positions. The goal of our project, "Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools," was to explore three different yet complementary strategies to recruit and retain a robust rural school mental health workforce: Rural Immersion Program, Virtual Professional Development via ECHO, and Workforce Hiring Strategy

Strategy 1: Rural Immersion Program

Immersion experiences are learning opportunities in which participants visit and stay in a community to develop a deeper sense of life in that region (Zittleman et al., 2014). A weeklong Rural Immersion Program was developed in southeast Colorado for graduate students enrolled in school counseling or school psychology programs in nearby states. The immersion was designed to increase students' positive attitudes about seeking employment in rural school districts.

Modeled after the Colorado Immersion Training program for faculty in the health sciences (Zittleman et al., 2014), our strategy consisted of three phases in 2019. In Phase 1 (one month before immersion), participating graduate students enrolled in school counselor or school psychology programs came together as a cohort to learn about southeast Colorado rural communities via presentations, discussions, readings, podcasts, and videos. During Phase 2 (one week), graduate students participated in an immersion in southeast Colorado, visiting schools, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), mental health agencies, and afterschool programs to talk with students, teachers, families, and agencies to learn about rural life, mental health

issues, school operating practices, community assets, resources, and challenges. From March 24-March 29, 2019, students visited seven school districts to meet principals, teachers, and students; current behavioral health professionals working in these districts; two mental health agencies; one afterschool program; two realtors; and two BOCES to learn about rural life, mental health issues, school operating practices, community assets, resources, housing options, and challenges. In addition, they learned about the local culture and history by visiting outdoor recreation areas and historical places such as Bent's Fort and the Comanche Internment Camp. If interested, in Phase 3 (one month after immersion), graduate students worked with BOCES directors to secure field placements for fall 2020.

Strategy 2: Virtual Professional Development via ECHO

ECHO-DU is a virtual professional learning program housed in CRSHE and designed to reduce health and educational disparities in rural and underserved communities. ECHO-DU is a replication site of Project ECHO, a virtual professional learning model that is used internationally and has been empirically shown to increase workforce capacity to provide best-practice specialty care (Arora et al., 2011). ECHO uses interactive video technology, and sessions consist of brief didactic presentations, case-based learning, and discussion. Project ECHO has expanded to over 130 sites across the globe, and the MacArthur Foundation recently recognized it as one of the top solutions to critical problems. While primarily used for health care professionals, ECHO recently expanded to the education field and is showing promise as an effective way to build educators' knowledge (Hardesty et al., 2020).

We created a school mental health ECHO series, Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools, to provide Colorado's rural school mental health professionals with (a) the latest best practices to meet students' mental health needs and (b) a safe forum to present their most challenging student and family cases and receive guidance from faculty and ECHO participants. Such ongoing peer-to-peer and faculty support may be key to school mental health professionals' self-efficacy, enjoyment, and ultimate success with their rural placement. The series consisted of eight 60-minute sessions and covered seven topics: trauma-informed care, depression, self-harm, suicide, school-community mental health agency partnerships, bullying, and school disengagement. The final session included a review and discussion of the seven topics. These topics were selected based on survey results in which registered participants were asked to indicate their interest in a range of topics.

Each session began with a 15-minute didactic presentation by a content expert, followed by a "case study" in which an ECHO participant shared a challenge and received suggestions, feedback, and resources from faculty, experts, and participants. A school psychology faculty member from the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver served as a content expert and facilitator of the case study discussions for all eight sessions. In addition, we invited experts from state agencies, the Morgridge College of Education, and local mental health organizations to present on each topic.

Strategy 3: Workforce Hiring

CRSHE partnered with two BOCES and school districts across rural Colorado to develop a workforce strategy consisting of a 5-year hiring forecast and cost-effective, innovative strategies to recruit a robust school mental health workforce. In Phase 1, we worked closely with the two BOCES Superintendent Advisory Councils, who hosted the immersion week, to identify hiring needs and strategies. In Phase 2, we surveyed administrators from rural Colorado BOCES and school districts to develop a statewide picture of hiring needs and strategies. Using data collected in both phases, we developed a 5-year strategic plan to meet rural school mental health workforce needs.

Based on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), the logic model in Figure 1 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/) provides a visual summary of how the three initiatives worked together to create a robust rural school mental health workforce. The Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools Project posed three research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways is a Rural Immersion Program an effective strategy to recruit future school counselors and psychologists?
2. To what extent and in what ways is a virtual professional development series titled "Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools" an effective strategy to retain the rural school mental health workforce?
3. What are rural school districts' school mental health professional hiring needs and what recruitment strategies might work?

Methods

The University of Denver Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol. Methods used to answer each research question are described below.

Research Question 1

Participants

To be eligible to participate in the immersion experience, students needed to be enrolled in a graduate program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) or the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) in Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Kansas, or Wyoming. Twenty-six programs met these criteria. The dean of the Morgridge College of Education, where CRSHE is housed, emailed the deans of colleges and schools that met the criteria to explain the program and request that information be shared with students. Graduate-level students were recruited from in spring 2019, with 12 students completing the online application form. These students participated in a brief telephone interview to gauge their fit and interest, and of the 12 students, seven students agreed to participate in the program. Reasons for not participating included family and school obligations or scheduling conflicts. Of the seven participants, two were raised in rural communities, five were pursuing master's degrees in school psychology, one was pursuing a PhD in school psychology, and one was studying to become a school counselor.

Design and Survey Instruments

A post-post survey design was used, in which participants were invited to complete the post-survey via paper and pen on the last day of the immersion and a follow-up survey via email six months later. The post-survey included 22 questions (16 closed-ended, 6 open-ended) which asked about plans to work in a rural setting, ways in which the immersion may have changed knowledge and opinions about rural settings, the utility of various elements of the immersion experience, and demographics. Examples of closed-ended items include: "As of today, how likely are you to seek out a job in a rural community after you graduate?" (1 = very unlikely, 2 = somewhat unlikely, 3 = undecided, 4 = somewhat likely, 5 = very likely); "Did this immersion program change your intentions about seeking out a job in a rural community after you graduate?" (1 = Yes, it increased the chances I will try to work in a rural community; 2 = No; 3 = Yes, it decreased the chances I will try to work in a rural community). Six open-ended questions were asked in the post-survey:

1. In your opinion, to what extent, if any, are programs like the Rural Immersion Program helpful to increasing the rural mental health workforce?
2. When you think about living in a rural community, what thoughts do you have?
3. Based on the immersion experience you had this week, what do you consider to be the main benefits and challenges of working in a rural community?
4. In what ways has this immersion experience impacted your likelihood of working in a rural community after you graduate?
5. What aspects of the immersion program informed your knowledge of working in rural communities and mental health needs? How so?
6. What aspects of this immersion program did you find particularly meaningful and why?

The follow-up survey was distributed six months later and consisted of seven questions: two closed-ended items about intentions to work in rural areas and five open-ended questions about ways to improve the program and effects the program had on career plans (e.g., "In your opinion, to what extent, if any, are programs like the Rural Immersion Program helpful to increasing the rural mental health workforce?").

Data Analysis

For quantitative data, descriptive and frequency analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics software, Version 28. For qualitative data, content analysis was used to identify patterns and themes within participants' written responses to five open-ended questions in the post- and follow-up surveys (Patton, 2002).

Research Question 2

Participants

Several state-level organizations focused on rural education recruited participants for the virtual professional development ECHO series by sharing a flyer about the opportunity. School psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other interested professionals across rural Colorado were invited to participate in an ECHO series, titled "Behavioral

Health Solutions for Rural Schools." After the recruitment period, 79 individuals registered. On average, participants were 39 years old (range: 23–61) and had 9.75 years of work experience. Due to the larger than anticipated interest in the ECHO series, smaller groups were formed by holding the same session on three different days of the week so that registrants could attend on the day that worked best for their schedule. An average of 33 participants attended each week. A total of 32 participants completed both the pre- and post-survey.

Design and Survey Instruments

A pre-post-survey design was used. Participants were invited to complete the pre-survey prior to the start of the ECHO series and the post-survey within two weeks of the final session. Both surveys were completed online. The pre-survey consisted of 61 questions (60 close-ended and 1 open-ended), and the post-survey included 56 questions (53 closed-ended, 3 open-ended). Both surveys included the same prompts about thoughts of leaving the profession (e.g., "Have you ever thought about leaving your current profession?", 1 = never, 5 = always); burnout (e.g., "I have felt trapped by my work," 1 = never, 5 = always); work self-efficacy (e.g., "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough," 1 = definitely false, 5 = definitely true); job satisfaction (e.g., "In general, I am satisfied with my job," 1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree); work support (e.g., "I can depend on my supervisor for help on the job," 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree); and demographics (e.g., highest degree). Items were selected from validated surveys (Adams et al., 2006; Boyar et al., 2014; Gjesfjeld et al., 2008; Klassen et al., 2009; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The post-survey also included open-ended questions about aspects of the ECHO learning experience, benefits and challenges of participating in the series, and changes they would implement on their approach to school mental health.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with SPSS Statistics software. Correlational, regression, and paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted to assess the impact of the ECHO series on retention, job burnout, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and work support. Open-ended questions about ECHO evaluation and impact were assessed for content by two trained researchers.

Research Question 3

Participants

The two BOCES directors on our study team contacted all 17 rural BOCES directors by email and asked them and district-level superintendents to complete a survey. BOCES directors and superintendents have important insights as to the needs of school mental health professionals.

Design and Survey Instrument

A systematic sampling procedure was used in which all rural BOCES directors and their superintendents were asked to complete a one-time survey consisting of 30 items (28 closed-ended, 2 open-ended). Questions pertained to school counselor and school psychology workforce needs and effective recruitment strategies. Example items (1 = very ineffective, 2 = somewhat ineffective, 3 = somewhat effective, 4 = very effective) include:

- How many school psychologists do you need to fully meet ALL of your students' needs?
- How many school psychologists do you currently employ?
- Of those currently employed, how many school psychologists do you think you'll need to replace in the next 5 years?
- From a budget perspective, how many school psychologists can you realistically afford?
- How effective is the following strategy for recruiting school mental health professionals to your district/BOCES? Publicize benefits of working in rural district (e.g., 4-day week; diverse job responsibilities; smaller number of students who you can develop long term relationships with).

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS. Several variables were developed to measure gaps in workforce needs. For example, "unmet workforce needs" was created by subtracting the number of currently employed counselors from the number needed to meet students' needs.

Findings

Research Question 1

Overall, participants reported that the immersion experience led to increased knowledge about rural

communities, schools, mental health challenges, and social opportunities (Table 1, online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/). In terms of the number of immersion activities and their impact, in-person events held during the immersion week were rated highly, while readings and related discussions that happened prior to the immersion were less popular.After spending the week in southeast Colorado, in the post-survey participants (n = 7) noted several benefits and challenges to working and living in rural communities. The opportunity for strong community support was identified as a main benefit. Participants also identified the ability to build relationships with elementary and high school students and their families and having regular interactions with school leaders and supervisors as strengths of living and working in rural communities. Alternatively, participants considered possible isolation, lack of resources, and the inability to separate work and community relationships to be among the challenges to working in a rural community. The following comments capture these points.

- I think it would be an incredible place to work in considering the potential for close knit relationships, community support and the connections you are able to build with your students because that is so unique to a rural community. I do also see the isolation initially but it's something I would be willing to try.
- I love the community aspect and forming strong relationships. I have some worries about the lack of social opportunities or making connections with people my age.

In the post-survey, when asked about the ways in which the immersion experience affected their likelihood of working in a rural community after graduation, six of the seven participants stated that they were more inclined to work in a rural setting. Two participants reflected:

- I think if I had any doubts about working in rural communities before, I don't anymore because there are so many possibilities; to have a greater impact... I was able to see different schools in the area, I have a bigger and more clear picture of the needs and challenges as well as possibilities.
- It has greatly impacted my work. I always thought I'd live in a small town and commute to a bigger school. For example, I am going to ask my professors for a practicum site in a rural area because of this experience.

When asked which aspects of the immersion were most helpful in building knowledge of working in rural communities and mental health needs, participants tended to say that the entire set of experiences was helpful. Several also specifically identified opportunities to meet with students and school leaders. For example, one participant said:

> The student panels and the teacher panels were extremely eye-opening. I loved hearing the first-hand accounts from the students and comparing those to how the staff perceived mental health needs. Speaking with the mental health professionals, whether BOCES or external provider, was also helpful.

Participants appreciated learning about local schools, students, community organizations and the history of the area including a visit to Amache, a Japanese American internment camp. Participants had an opportunity to speak with a local high school student who was the camp's museum docent. Across these experiences, participants reflected on awareness of mental health needs and resources while also appreciating creative solutions that emerged in rural communities, such as seeing a local student serve as a leader in the museum. One participant remarked:

> I really enjoyed the range of the experiences. [This school] was very impactful because the kids were so aware of their needs academically and lack of needed mental health services. The Amache program and watching the students participating as well was incredible.

On the post-survey immediately following immersion, participants were highly satisfied with their immersion experience, and all but one reported a positive shift in attitudes about working in rural environments (86%). All seven participants completed the follow-up survey six months later. Table 2 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/) presents findings related to participants' intentions to work in a rural setting from immediately after immersion to the six-month follow-up.

Research Question 2

Participants (n = 32) completed pre- and post-surveys on thoughts of leaving the profession, job burnout, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and work support. The correlation matrix in Table 3 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/) presents the associations

between the constructs. Participants who reported greater levels of job burnout also reported less emotional and instrumental support from their supervisors as well as increased thoughts of leaving their profession. Conversely, participants who had greater job satisfaction reported fewer feelings of job burnout and greater emotional and instrumental support from their supervisors (Table 3).

The mean and standard deviation for each construct and paired sample *t*-test results for pre- and post-series are reported in Table 4 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/). Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare thoughts of leaving the profession, job burnout, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and work support before and after attending the series. There was a significant difference in participant self-efficacy scores from pre-series (M = 32.09, SD = 3.43) to post-series (M = 34.09, SD = 3.53); $t(31)$ = 3.89, $p \leq 0.00$). Similarly, there was a significant difference in participant job satisfaction pre-series (M = 6.31, SD = 1.55) to post-series (M = 6.75, SD = 1.16); $t(31)$ = 2.30, p = 0.03). These results suggest that the Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools series improved participant self-efficacy and job satisfaction.

Overall, participants rated the Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools series and its various components (expert presentations, case presentations, discussions, etc.) positively with respect to their learning. Presentations from content experts and the Zoom chat box were particularly effective learning strategies (see Table 5, online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/). Participants were also asked questions about how the series would influence their current work. Overall, participants agreed they would share information they learned with their colleagues (n = 28, 87.5%), implement at least one change in their professional practice (n = 25, 78.1%), and take steps to strengthen or develop new community partnerships (n = 26, 81.3%). Almost half of participants anticipated staying in contact with other participants (n = 15, 46.9%).

In the post-survey, participants were asked to share thoughts about the benefits of participating in the Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools series. Common themes included the benefit of connecting with other rural school mental health professionals, sharing resources, getting ideas from each other, and learning about the latest research and best practices that fit the rural context. Several participants wrote about these ideas:

- Oftentimes, when we go to conferences, we hear about best practices from school districts that are triple our size-not much we can take away from those! The focus on small rural schools was really wonderful!
- The benefit of this series was to see that we are not alone in our struggles as a rural school district, and to see how other schools have gone about solving their struggles or issues. It is also nice to bounce ideas off of each other to see if we could maybe implement some of those ideas into our own school or curriculum.
- Collaboration with a wide range of professionals also in rural setting. Expertise of ECHO Project Leaders [were useful].

Research Question 3

An electronic survey was distributed to all 17 rural BOCES directors across rural Colorado. These directors were asked to send the survey to each of the superintendents in their region. Twelve BOCES directors and 44 superintendents (56 respondents total) responded. At least one person from 14 of the 17 BOCES in Colorado completed the survey (82%).

Respondents reported needing more school counselors (M = 3.1) than they currently employed (M = 1.9) or could realistically afford (M = 1.8). The pattern held for school psychologists, with the mean number of psychologists needed (M = 2.4) being almost twice as high as the number currently employed (M = 1.3) or affordable (M = 1.0). Additional data can be found in Table 6 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/).

Administrators also were asked about their thoughts on the effectiveness of specific recruitment strategies housed within the district or BOCES and strategies that could emerge from partnerships with universities (Table 7, online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/). In terms of district and BOCES recruitment strategies, those identified as most effective included offering higher salaries and loan forgiveness for school mental health professionals and improving localized pipeline programs. For university partnership strategies, offering reduced or free tuition to school employees seeking graduate degrees in school mental health professional programs and working with state legislatures to create loan repayment options were identified as most effective.

Rural school leaders were asked to identify the most promising strategies to recruit and retain school psychologists and school counselors. Not every participant responded to the question, and some respondents listed more than one strategy as the most effective. The top strategies included offering reduced or free tuition to school employees seeking graduate degrees and loan forgiveness. Additional information can be found in Table 8 (online only https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss2/).

Discussion

Innovative and tailored strategies are urgently needed to address the rural teacher workforce shortage. In addition to attending to teachers' mental health needs, a robust school mental health workforce is one of several ingredients needed to secure a highly trained teacher workforce. This study explored strategies to recruit and retain rural school mental health professionals. It is important to note study limitations including self-report data and a small sample size for the immersion program.

The Rural Immersion Program appeared to be a promising strategy for attracting future school counselors and psychologists to rural communities. Graduate students indicated high satisfaction with the immersion experience, and all but one student indicated an increased likelihood that they would pursue a rural position. That enthusiasm waned, however, after six months, with only about half of participants indicating they would seek rural employment. Careful consideration should be given to the timing of the immersion experience. Ideally, students would visit rural communities in the weeks before they apply for practicum and internship experiences. In addition, soon after the immersion, hiring organizations such as school districts and BOCES should actively recruit school counselors and psychologists using strategies such as those put forth by Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Zhang et al., 2020). It is also worth noting the limitation of a one-week immersion. With such a short period of time, participants may not develop a comprehensive view of living in rural areas.

The potential of using virtual professional development as a strategy to retain the existing rural school mental health workforce also was explored in this study. Rural school professionals indicated high satisfaction with the Behavioral Health Solutions for Rural Schools series delivered via ECHO and appreciated the unique opportunity to learn alongside their rural colleagues. They also reported increased self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which are key to job retention (Canrinus et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2012). Based on these findings, we recommend that state education agencies and other organizations supporting schools provide rural-focused learning opportunities to rural mental health professionals.

It was not surprising to find that rural school districts do not have enough school counselors or psychologists to meet students' needs. The most promising recruitment strategies included higher salaries, loan forgiveness, and grow-your-own programs. Rural administrators endorsed the ideas that universities could offer reduced or free tuition to school employees seeking graduate degrees in school mental health professional programs and create distance learning, online learning, and summer courses. They also indicated support for state lawmakers to create loan repayment options for school mental health professionals who work in underserved areas and other incentive programs to place and support school mental health professionals in rural communities. These findings resemble what other studies have found regarding recruiting rural teachers. For example, according to teachers in rural Illinois, the top teacher recruitment and retention strategies include providing competitive insurance packages and salaries, scheduling flexibility, financial incentives, and financial assistance for advanced college and endorsements (Ulferts, 2016). In response to these findings, the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education is collaborating with rural Colorado school professionals to design a rural hybrid Ed.S. school psychology degree program that allows rural community members to live and work in their communities while earning their degree.

Given the dearth of information on rural school mental health workforce recruitment and retention strategies, many opportunities for future research and evaluation exist. For example, it would be helpful to evaluate the effectiveness of one-week immersions vs. longer experiences on participant placements in rural communities post-graduation. It would also be helpful to examine the types of supervision, supports, and social factors that might contribute to an outsider deciding to remain in a rural community after an initial internship or practicum ends. In addition to the rural hybrid Ed.S. program for rural residents noted above, we are placing urban-based graduate students in internships in rural districts. We will be examining the benefits and challenges of both models in creating a robust rural mental health workforce. It also would

be helpful for researchers to interview existing school mental health professionals to understand the types of professional development and supports they desire to stay in the field.

Conclusion

There is reason for optimism when it comes to creating a robust rural school mental health workforce. Future school psychologists and counselors can see the unique appeal of living in a rural community. Opportunities are needed to introduce them to this special setting and follow immersion experiences with a strong recruitment plan. Rural school mental health professionals deeply appreciate and benefit from learning opportunities specifically designed for their context. State education agencies and funders could invest in making these opportunities more frequent and accessible to this population. In addition, to address workforce shortages, rural school districts need universities and state policymakers to be committed partners in designing innovative education programs and providing financial incentives for the next generation of school mental health professionals to pursue careers in rural settings.

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Suggested Citation:

Belansky, E. S., Diaz Solodukhin, L., Edelman, A., Hobbs, S., Hazel, C., & Cutforth, N. (2024). Strategies to recruit and retain the rural school mental health workforce. *The Rural Educator*, *45*(2), 32–42.