TEACHER JOB SATISFACTION:

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF WORKING CONDITIONS, SATISFACTION, AND COMMITMENT ON TEACHER RETENTION IN RURAL ALABAMA SCHOOLS

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Abstract

A nationwide teacher shortage has been a problem in our country for many years. Teacher vacancies continue to be plentiful, but enrollment in teacher preparatory programs continues to decline. This study aimed to investigate low teacher retention in rural Alabama schools. Through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this study examined teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction and how working conditions, and demographic details impacted teachers' intentions to remain in the field of education. This quantitative study was completed in three rural North Central Alabama school districts. The data revealed the school administrator's critical impact on their building and the importance of teachers having the resources to do their jobs effectively. But most importantly, the study highlighted that maintaining a solid culture is paramount to keeping teachers in the profession. District and state leaders must continue to foster and promote a positive culture in their local schools, as it is a key factor in teacher retention.

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Key Words: mental health, retention, job satisfaction, Alabama, School Administrator

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Like the rest of the nation, Alabama is suffering from a teacher shortage that continues to grow (Gilmore, 2018; Crain, 2023a; Mackey, 2023). In 2019, Dr. Eric Mackey, Alabama's State Superintendent, convened a group to discuss the teacher shortage in Alabama and the reduced number of students pursuing education as a career (The Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable members with support from the Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). Since 2010, there has been a 40% reduction in the number of college students pursuing educational degrees (The Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable members with support from the Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). Also concerning, during the 2019-2020 school year, Alabama had more than 1,700 teachers working out-of-field and without the proper certification to teach grades 7-12 (Crain, 2019). In 2023, the Alabama State Superintendent of Education issued a memo for school districts to report teacher shortage data for the 2023-2024 school year, further highlighting Alabama's continued teacher shortage (Mackey, 2023).

The teacher shortage problem has existed since the early 2000s (Heynoski et al., 2022). However, the statistics highlighting teacher mental health, job satisfaction, and well-being show that the problem has continued growing even though teacher burnout has been researched for several years. In 2023, Doan et al. found that 78% of teachers reported having at least one factor that hurts their well-being, 52% said they had more than two factors, and 25% of teachers surveyed were likely to leave teaching at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. Another survey from the same year demonstrated that 35% of teachers said they would leave the profession (Merrimack College, 2023).

Both surveys also found that female teachers were more likely to leave, be impacted by job-related stress, and reported higher dissatisfaction (Merrimack College, 2023; Doan et al., 2023). This was an important finding for Alabama because 80% of Alabama's teachers are female (The Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable members with support from the Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). Female teachers were more likely to spend time caring for others outside of the classroom, and since teaching is a helping profession, there was little time for female teachers to have time to care for themselves (Corrente et al., 2022). The same survey found that female teachers are also more likely to report feelings of burnout and stress and reported less resilience in the workplace. Teacher well-being concerns are also compounded by fears of personal safety at work. Twenty-six percent of teachers responded that they felt unsafe at school because of the threat of active shooters, student discipline, and physical altercations (Doan et al., 2023).

Problem Statement / Purpose

This research examined the problem of low teacher retention in rural Alabama. With increased accountability, poor working environments, and a lack of resources in rural, high-

poverty areas, teaching no longer appears attractive to students planning their career paths (Garcia & Weiss, 2019b). Because of the continued teacher shortage, Alabama administrators and districts must understand and invest in teacher recruitment and retention (Gilmore, 2018).

From 2008 to 2017, Alabama's teacher education programs reported a significant decline in the number of completers of programs, from 4,130 to 2,417 graduates (Education Commission of the States, 2019). This sharp decline sheds light on the unattractiveness of teaching as a profession to potential candidates. Moreover, when candidates complete an educator preparation program, they will still need to follow through in becoming teachers to meet the demands of high-need areas and subjects (Education Commission of the States, 2019). The cost of education programs is also a deterrent because candidates graduate from college and are provided a meager starting salary compared to other professions requiring the same educational experience (Heynoski et al., 2022).

This quantitative study aimed to investigate if there was a correlation between job satisfaction and teachers' intention to stay in the education profession in rural Alabama. With the growing teacher shortage and decline of students choosing education as a career path, understanding teacher job satisfaction and why teachers remain in the profession provides insights that can be used to impact policy and initiatives to keep teachers in the classroom.

Significance of the Study

The average rural school district spends $9,000 to replace a teacher, sometimes costing districts as much as $40,000 (Learning Policy Institute, 2017; Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services, 2023). In rural areas with strained local budgets, teacher turnover significantly impacts districts with limited resources (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Finding and retaining certified teachers to teach the subjects offered in rural areas is crucial. Also, when teachers leave, the district loses the expertise of their influence, which can contribute to reduced trust between teachers, building, and district leaders; therefore, when a rural teacher leaves, the gap is more than just one classroom instructor (The Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda, 2017).

The need for certified teachers is a growing problem in Alabama. For example, in Perry County, "more than 80 percent of the district's math and science classes are taught by teachers without proper certification" (Crain, 2019, para 25). The lack of certified teachers is a common trend in Alabama's Black Belt region. For example, in 2019, 66.7% of the teachers in Lowndes County lacked certification in their field. The same was prevalent throughout the area: Dallas, 56.6%; Hale, 54.2%; Marengo, 79%; Sumter, 66.7%; Barbour, 61.5%; Bullock, 50%. The teacher shortage impacts staffing and has a detrimental impact on student achievement.

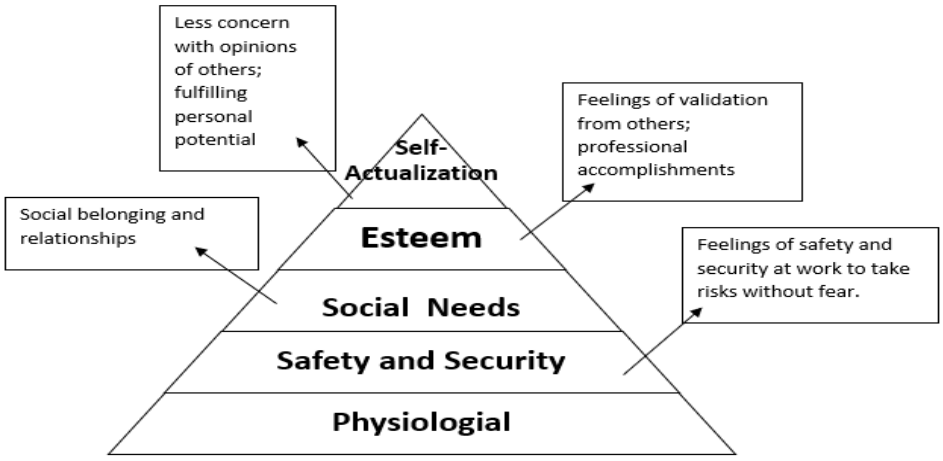
Local rural school leaders should seek to understand why teachers leave their schools and develop a plan to keep teachers in the schoolhouse. Principals influence turnovers, such as school climate, teacher morale, and performance (Garcia & Weiss, 2019a; Baptiste, 2019). The principal is often considered the catalyst for school conditions, which is true in rural schools (Smith et al., 2020). School leadership at the local school and district levels must be mindful of what teachers need to stay in the profession to help curb the teacher shortage.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study centered on job satisfaction and teacher retention using the hierarchy of needs (Hassard et al., 2018). By examining Alabama schools through this lens, the importance of rural principals and their impact on the health of their schools and staff was realized. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943; as cited in McLeod, 2024) outlined five different domains that must be met for a person to be satisfied. In 1970, Maslow extended his hierarchy of needs to include more categorized cognitive needs (McLeod, 2024). Maslow's original five-tiered hierarchy was used for this study to frame the research and research questions. Figure 1 demonstrates how Maslow's Hierarchy relates to the current study.

Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Teacher Retention



Note: Figure 1 connects Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the aspects of teacher job satisfaction and retention items that lead to teacher retention. Explanations for each area are from Cherry (2022).

In both versions of Maslow's hierarchy, the physiological and social needs, the most basic needs, must be met before the esteem and self-actualization needs can be satisfied (Cherry, 2022; McLeod, 2024). Leaders must ensure their employees' basic needs are met in a workplace or school to feel satisfied and content with their jobs. This concept is more than ensuring that teachers are fed and have shelter; principals must also ensure that teachers have permission to rest and prioritize their well-being.

Principals must also consider teachers' safety needs. If a person feels unsafe, they will not be productive at work (Thiagaraj & Thangaswamy, 2017). In the school context, leaders must be sure teachers have the resources they need, a way to have their voices heard and feel like they belong, and to be motivated to get the job done. Ansley et al. (2019b) noted that teachers with good relationships with their administrators often stay in less-than-ideal working environments because they feel supported and safe. These needs for relationship and safety are directly tied to the five domains outlined by Maslow; specifically, these needs are found in belonging, self-actualization, and esteem need levels.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into six areas of focus: the uniqueness of rural schools, work environment, retention strategies, leadership style, climate and culture, and educator mental health. The first section emphasizes the unique characteristics of rural schools and rural living. The second area highlights the importance of the overall work environment and its impact on teacher morale, engagement, and retention. The third section focuses on different retention strategies that can be used to keep teachers in rural schools. The fourth section highlights the unique role of the rural school principal and his overarching influence on the school. The fifth section dives into climate and culture, their definitions, and recognition of healthy work environments. The final section discusses educator mental health and its impact on job satisfaction and retention.

Unique Facets of Rural Schools

Rural schools are unique and provide a variety of challenges and benefits for teachers, administrators, and families. In 2017, rural schools served 8.9 million students, and about half were concentrated in 10 states (Showalter et al., 2017). In 2023, the number of students who attended rural schools in America had grown to 9.5 million (Showalter et al., 2023). Alabama is one of those states where rural community schools are prevalent. In 2017, more than one-third of Alabama's students attended a rural school, and 60% were considered low-income (Showalter et al., 2017). Only 11.2% of rural students in Alabama have access to Advanced Placement courses; this is the lowest in the nation. Nationwide, rural students suffer from the national digital divide, making access to online learning impossible, and this was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Teiken & Montgomery, 2021). Showalter et al. (2023) found that only one in five students in Alabama had access to high-quality home internet, a disadvantage for Alabama's students.

Rural schools are often the largest employer in rural areas (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). If the rural school closes, the community and students suffer. Funding is still one of the most considerable inequities in public education. It is challenging to sustain the local school, retain excellent teachers, and encourage community engagement when schools become a commodity in the free market (Potterhorn, 2018; Rooks, 2018). Nationally, 17% of the education budget is for rural schools (Showalter et al., 2017). Also, parents have a choice now, and public school is one of many viable options (Potterhorn, 2018; Heynoski et al., 2022). In Alabama, homeschooling is not heavily regulated and is an easy option for parents who disagree with the school's policies (The Homeschool Legal Defense Association, 2024). Finally, teachers and district leaders must be transparent about the challenges that rural teaching poses (Tran et al., 2020). Education is a social industry, and rural schools must overcome the stereotypes often attributed to rural schools and communities to stay competitive (Reid et al., 2010).

Work Environment

Unlike urban teachers, rural teachers are surrounded by work wherever they go. Rural teachers and their clientele are part of the same social circles, share shopping centers, and attend community events together (Huysman, 2008). This constant engagement must be acknowledged because emotional exhaustion has been shown to indicate teacher attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Also, the school climate is more difficult in schools with high poverty rates, and those teachers are more likely to say they want to leave and work elsewhere (Garcia & Weiss, 2019a).

When rural and high poverty rates collide, it takes work to maintain a positive climate.

Ansley et al. (2019b) found that teachers' most important working conditions were related to job design, relationships with coworkers, and the influence of the school leader. To encourage teachers to stay, administrators should develop a climate of trust (Edinger & Edinger, 2018). Garcia and Weiss (2019a) found that the school climate impacts "teacher satisfaction, morale, and expectation about staying in the profession" (p. 3). Rural administrators work to create environments that are as stress-free as possible because when teachers are happy, they are more apt to stay (Devaki et al., 2019). Notably, when teachers are committed and satisfied, they solve problems instead of causing them (Akdemir & Ayik, 2017). It has also been shown that teachers who are more confident at their jobs and have their emotional well-being supported have reported less occupational stress and increased commitment (Ansley et al., 2019a; Lester et al., 2020). In a rural context, it is crucial to understand that job dissatisfaction is a major cause of teacher attrition. Ingersoll and Tran (2023) found that 61% of teachers leaving the field were dissatisfied with their jobs. When looking deeper, 63% of teachers left because of school administration, 55% because of accountability and testing, and 50% because they could not provide input when decisions were made.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) had similar findings when examining teacher burnout. Teachers no longer feel like they are making an impact; therefore, the job is less important than it once was. Habib (2020) also found that teacher burnout impacts the overall quality of teaching, and burnout can come from an overly competitive work environment. Administrators must be alert to this kind of competition because it can be detrimental. Administrators should work to improve teacher self-efficacy to help ward off burnout, so teachers have the confidence that they are still making a difference.

The importance of administrators being in tune with the climate and culture of their school is further compounded with the introduction of Millennials and Gen Z into the workplace. Millennials entering the workforce grew up feeling that the world was all about them because of the prevalence of social media, and teaching is anything but self-centered (Harding & Parsons, 2011). New teacher candidates need help understanding how to work collaboratively. With the rise of online teacher preparation programs, many of these candidates would rather work alone. However, just like seasoned teachers, millennials have also stated that a supportive climate and culture are what they need to stay in the field (Gilmore, 2018).

Retention Strategies

Rural districts must establish a sense of organizational commitment to keep good teachers in rural schools. Dumay and Galand (2021) described the idea of organizational commitment as a psychological bond between team members and where they work. A shared vision, values, and positive attitudes toward the work environment create this bond. The research team also noted that organizational commitment indicates quality teaching and intention to remain on the job. According to See et al. (2020), teacher retention has been a concern for decades, so it makes sense that developing organizational commitment is one step toward retaining good teachers. Teachers need to feel supported by the administration and stakeholders (Whipp & Salin, 2018; Sulit, 2020; Park & Johnson, 2019; Shuls & Flores, 2020; Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

New teachers need a mentor to help them acclimate to their new school, community, and coworkers. Mentoring also helps new teachers understand the climate, culture, and expectations (Beck et al., 2020; Shuls & Flores, 2020; Rooks, 2018). Mentoring is one avenue principals can

use to establish that collaboration is an integral part of their school culture (Eginli, 2021; Miller, 2020). Induction programs also immerse new hires into their rural environment to help prevent burnout (Browning & Romer, 2020). Banghart (2021) also found that teachers who did not participate in such programs were twice as likely to leave the profession. Mentoring programs must be purposefully designed, and mentors and mentees must be matched with an intention for new teachers to have the most supportive mentor possible (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Mentoring is essential if teacher candidates do not have adequate field experience. Mentoring programs have been recognized for improving teacher retention (Whipp & Salin, 2017; Rooks, 2018).

K-12 schools and universities should collaborate to ensure that rural teacher preparation programs are authentic, that placements are extensive and consistent, and that they accurately depict what it is like to be a rural classroom teacher (Beck et al., 2020). Retention increases when teachers enter the field with a correct vision of the expectations and workload. Relevant coursework focusing on rural schools and their unique challenges has increased job satisfaction and retention (Rooks, 2018). Tran et al. (2020) noted that pre-service teachers need more placements in rural settings to fully understand the challenges teachers and students face in these areas. Understanding the resilience needed to work in a rural school is essential (Beck et al., 2020). Teachers who do not feel prepared are three times more likely to leave the classroom than teachers who feel ready and equipped to lead a classroom (Banghart, 2021).

Another consideration for increasing teacher retention is understanding how teachers' demographics predict retention. This is important for rural districts because of the limited workforce and serious staffing concerns (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Hiring teachers for a rural school is difficult, and 61% of administrators have reported struggles in hiring teachers, school counselors, and mental health professionals (Bryant et al., 2023). Young, white female and male teachers are more likely to leave the profession than teachers of color (Sass et al., 2012). Older female teachers who start their careers later in life will stay. Bryant et al. (2023) found that 38% of teachers planned to leave the profession. For older teachers, the percentage dropped to 30%. This is something to consider for rural schools with staffing concerns.

It is also important to note that at the time of this study, many rural schools have been positively impacted by the release of the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023). When the first round of ESSER money was released in March 2020, Alabama was awarded $216,947,540. This money allowed schools and universities to make facility improvements to address the spread of COVID-19, support distance learning, increase classroom instructional opportunities, and offset some of the costs associated with fighting a pandemic. In December 2020, a second round of ESSR funds was released, and Alabama received $899,464,932. In June 2021, the final relief allocation, American Rescue Plan (ARP) ESSER, was released, and Alabama received $2,021,518,529. These investments allowed schools across Alabama and the nation to make needed facility improvements, upgrade infrastructure, and increase technology substantially and realistically. While these initiatives and improvements may help to attract new teachers, it remains to be seen how it impacts retention.

Leadership Style

Administrators set the tone for the school, and their decisions, supervision, and attitudes directly impact all staff and students (Ansley et al., 2019a). If the leadership is participatory, the teachers will work together. Research has established a relationship between principal support,

teacher commitment, and job satisfaction, so local school principals must provide this open-door and collaborative environment (Berry, 2012; Edinger & Edinger, 2018). Reaves and Cozzens (2018) found that teachers wanted administrators who actively monitor their teaching because it increased self-efficacy. They also noted the importance of clear expectations from administrators to increase intrinsic motivation. Providing clear expectations balanced with modeling acceptable behaviors helps all employees (Smith et al., 2020). The principal directly impacts a school's climate and culture by modeling their expectations of their teachers, students, and stakeholders. A principal willing to stand up to high-needs parents and external forces who try to dictate teachers' jobs allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning. Principals must remember their responsibility to protect the school and provide a quality educational experience for all students. The principal is the catalyst for everything in the building.

Impact of Climate and Culture

Throughout the literature review, climate and culture and their overarching impact have been tied to each of the previous sections. Climate and culture are related ideas but not the same thing (Gruenert, 2008). *Culture* is a standard set of beliefs and attitudes shared by a group and guides the language, interaction, and group activities (Barkley et al., 2014). Culture is an organization's collective personality (Gruenert, 2008). The National School Climate Counsel defines *climate* as "the quality and character of school life" (2022, para 3). What teachers believe impacts how they do their jobs; therefore, if the school's culture is healthy, the school's climate is healthy. The workplace climate and culture influence an educator's overall social and emotional well-being and impact retention and attrition (Browning & Romer, 2020; Pickeral et al., 2009). More teachers feel safe working in a team when schools have a strong culture and believe they can impact student learning and achievement (Dumay & Galand, 2021).

Educator Mental Health

In the winter of 2023, Merrimack College completed its second annual teacher job satisfaction survey. Their findings were significant. In 2023, 35% of teachers surveyed stated they would leave the profession. This is down from 44% the previous year. However, it was still a significant percentage of the workforce. The overall job satisfaction score was 20%, up from 12% in 2022. Teachers with less than three years of experience, secondary certified teachers, and teachers in majority Hispanic schools demonstrated the most growth in job satisfaction. They also found that men were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than women. Finally, job dissatisfaction made teachers of color more likely to leave. While the numbers are improving, they are still alarming because only 45% of current teachers surveyed would advise their younger self to choose teaching as a career. If current professionals do not talk positively about their jobs to stakeholders, educators lose the desire to do the work (Casas, 2017). In the rural context, 61% of teachers cited personal dissatisfaction as a reason they were leaving the profession (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Addressing dissatisfaction in rural schools is an immediate concern.

Mental health is not only a worry for classroom teachers but also for principals and support staff. School nurses reported suffering trauma due to the job demands required by the COVID-19 pandemic (Merkle et al., 2023). Similarly, because of the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public schools, "teachers will likely be responsible for getting students caught up academically and meeting increased mental health needs for years to come" (Nygaard et al., 2022, p. 858).

Another concern for teachers' mental health is the public's lack of respect for teaching as a profession. In 2023, only 55% of teachers reported feeling the public respected them and viewed them as professionals (Merrimack College, 2023; Heynoski et al., 2022). This perceived lack of respect is up from 46% in 2022 (Merrimack College, 2023). Notably, in the Black community, teachers were much more respected, with 79% of respondents saying they were seen as professionals.

Levin et al. (2020) found that 98% of principals requested more professional development to feel more satisfied. Overwhelmingly, they asked for professional development in social and emotional development and mental health. Principals need help in those areas to improve the school climate, which influences many other factors at school (Ozgenel, 2020). If principals are expected to create nurturing environments, they must be shown how (Eginil, 2021). Only 33% of teachers stated that their administration supported mental health, so there is a market for this professional development (Merrimack College, 2023). In the same survey, 56% of the respondents said that teacher mental health had "gotten a little worse" or "gotten a lot worse" since the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year. Forty-one percent of respondents also self-reported that the profession of teaching negatively impacted their mental health. With this information, districts and school leaders must work to improve teachers' mental health because it will lead to improved outcomes for students (Nygaard et al., 2022).

There are barriers to providing teachers with mental health care, like limited funding, shortage of resources, and balancing the workload of academics, behavior, and student mental health (Nygaard et al., 2022). With 11% of teachers impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attending to teacher mental health is crucial (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2023). Idoiaga Mondragon et al. (2023) argued that teachers are suffering more from PTSD because they were part of the frontline of defense during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both their physical and mental health were put at risk, which led to PTSD and other cognitive disorders.

Similarly, Borntrager et al. (2012) reported that 76.4% of teachers had a history of trauma, and 77.3% of participants described their student populations as being moderately traumatized. While this data is over ten years old, it sheds light on the issue of mental health in schools and its longevity. Trauma in school personnel is not a new phenomenon. Teachers are also subject to secondary trauma stress (STS) as they help students deal with their trauma (Pierrottet, 2022). STS has been widely researched in other helping professions like first responders and nurses. However, teachers suffer, too, because they spend more time with students than anyone else besides their parents. Mental health needs are increasing, and teachers need on-the-job training to support their students and themselves, as well as self-care resources and mental health services (Borntrager et al., 2012; Pierrottet, 2022). In one survey, 31% of teachers who were leaving the profession cited personal well-being as the cause (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023).

Methods

This quantitative study aimed to investigate how teacher working conditions and demographics (grade level, years of service, marital status, age) impact job satisfaction and teachers' intention to remain in the field of education.

Three districts in North-Central Alabama were invited to participate in a survey to

examine working conditions and job satisfaction. The survey allowed participants to provide feedback on various topics using a five-point or seven-point scale, and some questions also allowed respondents to expound upon their answers. Perrachione et al. first used this Likert-type scale in 2008. The survey was intended to change the conversation from attrition to retention; therefore, it should focus on keeping good teachers and not only discussing why they leave.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this quantitative study was three rural school districts in North-Central Alabama. This sample was selected because of its convenience. The school districts were similar in size and demographics. The counties where the districts are located all have community colleges. The counties also have one central city or town and several other incorporated municipalities. All three counties have a competing city school system. Each county has some industry ranging from poultry to natural resources as a major employer. They also have at least one park or natural wonder that attracts small to moderate numbers of visitors and tourists. All three sites serve white students; Hispanic is the second largest student population. These three school systems were selected due to their proximity and familiarity with how the systems are organized. All teachers employed at these sites were invited to participate in the survey.

Sampling and Sampling Procedures

The convenience sample for this study was selected by examining data on years of service from a target population identified by the study's delimitation (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). All participants identified in the sample were sent the survey via email to participate and based on the number of employees reported from these sites, 1,293 teachers, a sample size calculator indicated that the study would need a target of 430 participants with 50% participation (Creative Research Systems, n.d.). A confidence level of 95% was used to determine the suggested sample size. A confidence interval of four was selected to estimate the margin of error (Adams & Lawrence, 2019).

Instrumentation

The instrument for this study was first introduced and used by Perrachione et al. (2008) and focuses specifically on teacher retention and job satisfaction. It was used with written permission from the original authors and distributed via email using Google Forms. Site codes were used to represent each participating local school district. To maintain anonymity, the districts are listed as Site A, Site B, and Site C throughout this study.

Results

This study aimed to gauge teacher job satisfaction and working conditions in rural schools in Alabama. Nationally, this was significant since 35% of teachers surveyed stated they were likely to leave the profession (Merrimack College, 2023). In 2018, only 4% of Alabama's high school students who took the ACT reported that they were interested in teaching as a profession (The Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable members, with support from the Southern Regional Education Board, 2020). State and district leaders must find out what is working in Alabama's schools if they hope to attract today's high school graduates to the field of education.

Descriptive Statistics

For RQ 1, descriptive statistics determined teachers' perceptions of working conditions and job satisfaction. Using the survey data, descriptive statistics were used to describe the population of the participants (n = 202). Site A had the most participation (n = 119, 58.05%), Site B (n =48, 23.41%), and Site C (n = 35, 17.07%). The frequencies and percentages for other demographic questions are reported in Table 1. It was notable that 51.41% of respondents have master's degrees. This was a higher percentage than expected. Also, 81.46% of the respondents were female, a typical finding in Alabama. In a 2020 report, 80% of Alabama's teachers were female (The Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable members supported by Southern Regional Education Board, 2020).

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the teacher perception data on their likelihood to remain in the profession. Notably, 45.05% of the respondents were satisfied with the teaching profession. However, 97 respondents answered that they certainly would, would, or chances about even considering leaving the profession for another occupation, which was 48% of the sample. Frequencies and percentages for the teacher perception data on their likelihood to remain in the profession are presented in Table 2.

For RQ2, working conditions and job satisfaction were examined. The working conditions variable was created using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to reduce the number of variables because the survey was extensive. The questions from the survey, as identified by PCA, were used to compile the overall variable for working conditions. The working conditions variable originally had seven answer choices: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly agree. These answer choices were condensed into three categories (positive, neutral, and negative) to condense the data set. For working conditions, M =2.79, SD = .552. Question 29 (How satisfied are you with teaching as a profession?) originally had five answer choices. To condense the data, these answers were re-coded to create three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. For job satisfaction, M =2.54, SD = .773. Both mean scores were between 2 and 3, indicating a positive response for each variable.

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Table 1

Frequency Table for Participant Demographics

Survey Item	Category	*N*	%
What is the highest degree you have earned?	Bachelors	75	37.13
	Master's	108	53.47
	Educational Specialist	17	8.29
	Doctorate	2	.99
What are the number of years you have taught in education?	10 or less	81	40.10
	11-14	21	10.40
	15-20	44	21.78
	21-25	29	14.36
	26 or more	27	13.17
What is your age?	35 or under	64	31.68
	36-45	51	25.25
	46-55	65	32.18
	56-65	19	9.41
	66 or older	3	1.49
Gender	Male	35	17.07
	Female	167	81.46

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal zero.

Table 2

Frequency Table for Teachers' Intention to Remain in the Teaching Profession

Survey Item	Category	*n*	%
How long do you plan to remain in teaching?	Highly likely to stay	88	43.56
	Very likely to stay	66	32.67
	Neutral	25	12.38
	Not likely to stay	16	7.92
	Not staying	7	3.47
If the opportunity arose, would you leave the teaching profession for another occupation?	Certainly, I would not	28	13.86
	Probably would not	77	38.12
	Chances about even	54	26.73
	Probably would	19	9.41
	Certainly would	24	11.88
How satisfied are you with teaching as a profession?	Very dissatisfied	12	5.94
	Somewhat dissatisfied	25	12.38
	Neutral	22	10.89
	Somewhat Satisfied	91	45.05
	Very Satisfied	53	26.24

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100.

For RQ3, four categories were examined to test the hypotheses for each listed category (climate, culture, resources, administration). Each category's variable was created using questions identified through PCA. The items had to be reverse-scored before two questions could be included in the new variable since the statements were stated negatively. From those identified questions, a new mean was calculated by combining the answers from each participant. The survey answers were re-coded to a three-point scale: *3* was a positive response, *2* was a neutral response, and *1* was a negative response. The data were condensed to this three-point scale to make calculations easier and results easier to understand. Descriptive statistics for RQ3 are found in Table 3. The highest mean, culture, $M = 2.84$, was interesting and supported the research about the importance of school culture (Browning & Romer, 2020). The data were negatively skewed for climate, resources, and administration, indicating that most scores are higher on the scale (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

For RQ4, four categories (highest degree earned, years of service, marital status, age) were used to examine how demographic features impacted teachers' intention to remain in the field. The most frequently observed responses for each category were: *f master's degree* = 106; *f ten or fewer years of experience* = 81; *f married* = 154; and *f 46-55 years of age* = 64. In 2017-2018, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 49.2% of Alabama's teachers held a master's degree, and that number aligns with the sample for this study; 53.47% of survey respondents had earned a master's degree (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS)). The same survey reported that the average age of teachers in Alabama was 42.4. Nationally, the average years of teaching experience was 8.2. For this study, 40.01% percent of teachers had less than 10 years of experience.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Research Question 3

Category	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
Climate	2.34	0.65	-.48	-0.71
Culture	2.84	0.45	-2.85	7.39
Resources	2.15	0.84	-.255	-1.52
Administration	2.79	0.55	-2.55	5.08

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100.

Research Question 1

Descriptive statistics determined teachers' perceptions of working conditions and job satisfaction. The two variables explored were working conditions and question 29 (How satisfied are you with teaching as a profession?). The working conditions variable was created using questions identified by PCA. The scale for the answers to working conditions was a seven-point scale: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The original response scale for question 29 (How satisfied are you with teaching as a profession?) had five possible answers: very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, somewhat

dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied. To condense the data set, the answers were re-coded into three response categories: positive, neutral, and negative. For working conditions, $M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.55$, and skewness of -1.168. For Q29, $M = 2.54$, $SD = .77$, and skewness of -1.27. This finding indicated that both tests were negatively skewed, which meant most answers were from the higher side of the scale (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Overall, 71.29% of the sample reported they were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied when asked about job satisfaction. Only 5.94% responded that they were very dissatisfied. Similarly, 86.14% responded positively when asked about working conditions, and 6.93% of participants reported negative feelings about job satisfaction.

Research Question 2

To understand the perceptions of working conditions to the demographic information collected in the survey, a Chi-Square test of Independence was completed to determine if an association existed. To run the test, researchers used the overall variable for working conditions created using PCA for Question 1. The answer choices for these questions were presented in a Likert-style scale with seven options. The responses were condensed to make the data more manageable. The first three answer choices (strongly disagree, disagree, and somewhat disagree) were combined to create a negative response category; answer choice four was neutral. The remaining decisions (somewhat agree, agree, and strongly disagree) were combined to make a positive response category. The Chi-Square Test of Independence, χ^2 (4, $n = 202$) = 9.182, $p = .057$, demonstrated that these two variables were unrelated because $p > .05$. Values less than .05 demonstrate significance. Therefore, for this study, working conditions were not significantly related to job satisfaction, $p = .57$.

Research Question 3

For RQ3 (Is there a relationship between teachers' working conditions, climate, culture, resources, administration, and their intention to stay in the field?), the overall variables for climate, culture, resources, and administration PCA were used to determine what questions should be grouped to create the overall variable (Lund Research Ltd, 2018). Each participant's answers to the identified questions were combined to determine an overall mean score for the analysis.

Each category, climate, culture, resources, and administration were tested and reported independently as sub-hypotheses. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to detect if a relationship was found between the new climate variable and question 28 (I plan to remain in this profession). The results demonstrated χ^2 (4, $n = 202$) = 5.833, $p = .212$. These results mean no relation between the climate variable and question 28. For this study, climate does not appear to factor into teachers remaining in the profession. For climate, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The test results were χ^2 (4, $n = 202$) = 39.691, $p < .001$. These results demonstrate a strong relationship between culture and a teacher's remaining in the profession. A moderate effect size was also found in Cramer's $V = .313$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis for culture was accepted. The results χ^2 (4, $n = 202$) = 10.094, $p = .039$ demonstrate that for this study, resources affect teachers' intention to remain in the profession with a weak effect size, Cramer's $V = .158$, so the null hypothesis was rejected. The variable created for RQ1, working conditions, was used for comparison because the principal is the deciding factor on climate and working conditions in a school (Ansley et al., 2019b; Smith et al., 2020; The Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda, 2017). The Chi-Square Test of Independence

results demonstrated χ^2 (4, n = 202) = 13.922, p = .008. These results indicate a significant relationship between teachers' intentions to remain in the profession and the administrator, and a weak effect size was found, Cramer's V = .186. Based on these results, the null hypothesis for RQ3 was rejected for culture, resources, and administration, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Research Question 4

An ordinal regression model was applied to RQ4 (How do demographic features (highest degree earned, years of service, marital status, age) predict teachers' intention to remain in education?). Because the hypotheses for RQ4 had four categories, each category was tested independently with its hypotheses. The research question's four categories to test were selected based on several factors. The highest degree earned was used because it is a reasonable factor to conclude that the more a person invests in their education and career, the more passion and commitment they have. In Alabama, years of service are connected to the retirement system and are considered vested. If a person is close to retirement, it is logical to believe they would stay in the field to meet the years needed to retire without penalty for marital status, which is a commitment – they are no longer thinking just for themselves. Changing careers when someone has a family is a significant decision that is thoughtfully considered. Finally, age was chosen to see if different generations demonstrated divergent patterns with a commitment to stay in the profession. Each category was related to one specific question on the survey, so no new variables had to be created.

When examining the highest degree earned and teachers' intention to remain in the profession, the model's results are not significant, χ^2 (3) = 4.38, p = .223, so the highest degree earned did not predict teachers' intentions to remain in the field. Thus, the null hypothesis for the highest degree earned demographic category was not rejected. When testing marital status and intention to stay in the field, the test resulted in χ^2 (1) = 0.03, p = .885, indicating that marital status was not a predictor of teachers' intentions to remain in the field of education. This test resulted in χ^2 (1) = 0.03, p = .885, indicating that marital status was not a predictor of teachers' intentions to remain in the field of education.

Age ranges were also examined to see if it was a predictor of teacher retention. Age was also found to have no relationship with teachers' intention to remain in the profession, $\chi2(4)$ = 5.87, p = .209. The null hypothesis was not rejected for the age category because it was not a predictor of teacher attrition. The years of service ranges were tested to see if they predicted teachers' intention to remain in the field. The survey answer choices were dummy coded for performing the ordinal regression: Level 1- 10 or fewer years in education; Level 2- 10 to 14 years; Level 3- 15 to 20 years; Level 4- 21 to 25 years; and Level 5- 26 or more years. The complete odds ratio results are reported in Table 4.

Years of service were found to have a strong relationship to teachers' intentions to remain, $\chi2(8)$ = 16.23, p = .039. The null hypothesis was rejected. However, one grouping was found to have a significant difference in the odds, Answer level 3 and Question 28 (I plan to remain in this profession) (OR = 0.31, [0.12, 0.81]). For question 42 (How many years have you taught in education?), level 3 represented respondents who had served 15 to 20 years. For Question 28, level 3 was a positive response. The odds ratio demonstrated that observing answer level 3 (15-20 years of service) decreased the odds of a positive answer by .31. Therefore, mid-year career teachers were the most likely to leave the profession.

Table 4

Odds Ratios for Years of Service and Teachers' Intention to Remain in Education

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	χ^2	*p*	*OR*	95.00% CI
(Intercept): 1	-2.21	0.37	35.25	<.001	-	-
(Intercept): 2	-1.65	0.30	29.88	<.001	-	-
11-14 years: less than 10	-0.42	0.73	0.33	.564	0.66	[0.16, 2.73]
11-14 years: 11-14 years	-0.49	0.60	0.68	.409	0.61	[0.19, 1.96]
15-20 years: less than 10	.083	0.81	1.05	.306	2.30	[0.47, 11.35]
15:20 years: 11-14 years	0.01	0.51	0.00	.984	1.01	[0.37, 2.75]
21-25 years: less than 10	-0.64	0.62	1.058	.298	0.53	[0.16, 1.76]
21-25 years: 11-14 years	-1.16	0.49	5.67	.017	0.31	[0.12, 0.81]
26 or more: less than 10.	26.38	142,693.12	0.00	1.000	4.50×10^{11}	[0.00, Inf]
26 or more: 11-14 years	-0.40	0.55	0.53	.468	0.67	[0.23, 1.98]

Note: CI = Confidence Interval; The bolded *p*-value is the only significant result. [a] Years in Education, code 3, 15-20 years; Remain in the profession, code 3, high. Teachers in the middle of their careers are more likely to leave the profession.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the problem of low teacher retention in rural Alabama. Teaching is no longer attractive due to increased accountability, substandard working conditions, and a need for more resources in high-poverty areas (Garcia & Wiess, 2019b). The study focused on three rural districts in North Central Alabama. The districts were similar in size, funding, demographics, and geographical features and were located closely to one another. Data were collected via a cross-sectional survey administered concurrently in all three participating school districts. Understanding why teachers stay in the classroom is paramount to increasing teacher retention and addressing attrition. With declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs in Alabama and nationwide, districts and administrators need to understand why teachers stay and how they can make teaching an attractive career (Education Commission of the States, 2019).

The first research question was used to determine the current reality of teachers' perceptions of working conditions and job satisfaction. Overall, the teachers in this study had a positive view of working conditions and job satisfaction. Rural schools provide personal satisfaction, close community ties, meaningful work, and a sense of safety often not found in more urban districts (Miller, 2020; Goodpaster, 2012; Tran et al., 2020; Bryant et al., 2023). However, there are still challenges that must be considered.

The second question examined was, is there an association between teachers' perceptions of working conditions and job satisfaction? This question was tested using a Chi-Square Test of Independence. The results found that the association between satisfaction with the teaching profession and working conditions was not statistically significant, $p = .57$. Because the results were unimportant, it was concluded that working conditions did not have an association with job satisfaction for this study and this sample. Consistently, the research referred to the importance of working conditions and job satisfaction (Huysman, 2008; Ansley et al., 2019b; Garcia & Wiess, 2019a). However, more research should be conducted to see if this trend is found in other locations throughout the state. This was an important finding because it does not follow the

traditional view found in literature.

The third question that was examined was, is there a relationship between teachers' working conditions (climate, culture, resources, administration) and their intention to stay in the field? A Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to evaluate each variable (climate, culture, resources, administration). The climate variable was tested first and no statistical significance between climate and intention to remain in the field was found, $p = .212$. However, a statistically significant effect was found when examining culture, $p < .001$. Resources and teacher intention to remain in the field were also statistically associated, $p = .039$. Finally, administration and teacher intention to stay in the field was also statistically significant, $p = .008$.

Because three of the four categories that constituted the variable working conditions were found to have statistically significant associations, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, the conclusion was that an association between working conditions and teachers' intention to remain in the field of education exists. This finding is consistent with the literature review (Garcia & Wiess, 2018b; Ansley et al., 2019a; Don et al., 2021; Berry. 2012; Dagenhart et al., 2005).

The last question that was investigated was, how do demographic features (highest degree earned, years of service, marital status, age) predict teacher intention to remain in education? The ordinal regression model was used to see how well each category (highest degree earned, years of service, marital status, age) predicted teacher intention. When examining the highest degree earned, the results indicated that the category of years of service did not predict intention, $p = .223$. Marital status was also found not to be a predictor of intentions, $p = .885$. When testing teachers' ages, it was found not to predict teachers' intentions, $p = .209$. This was an unexpected finding because other studies have found that age is related to attrition (Sass et al., 2012). Finally, the years of service category predicted teachers' intention to remain in the field, $p = .039$. A significant difference in the odds was found when looking at teachers with 15-20 years of service. The intention to remain in education, level 3, was a positive response. Observing the 15-20 years of service category decreased the odds of a positive reaction by .31 times. Based on these results, the null hypothesis was not rejected because three of the four categories (highest degree earned, marital status, age) were found to have no relationship with teachers' intentions to remain in the field of education. However, the null hypothesis for years of service was rejected because years of service impact commitment to stay in the field of education.

The findings for RQ1 were encouraging. Although working in a rural community has difficulties, it was refreshing to see that most respondents in this sample positively rated their perceptions of working conditions and job satisfaction. The response to working conditions was not expected to be so high, $M = 2.79$. It would be interesting to look at this finding more in-depth to see what specific aspects of working conditions could be attributed to this response.

It was notable to find that for this study, working conditions were not found to have an association with job satisfaction. Ansley et al. (2019b) noted that job design, relationships with coworkers, and the influence of the school leader were teachers' most important working conditions. This aligns with the PCA used to create the variable of working conditions for RQ2. Comparing this finding to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this is a surprising answer to RQ2 because basic needs of safety, social belonging, and security are needed before people feel professional accomplishment (Cherry, 2022). These results can be attributed to several factors. Akdemir and Ayik (2017) noted that when teachers are committed and satisfied, they tend to

solve problems and not cause them. In rural areas, the school is also the community's social hub, where close relationships are formed with many families, which may also account for teachers being satisfied with their working conditions (Goodpastre, 2012; Teiken & Montgomery, 2021; Tran et al., 2020; Miller, 2020).

These close community ties and relationships may also lead to higher teacher self-efficacy in these districts. *Self-efficacy* is the belief that what we do matters (Bandura, 1977; Hattie, 2012; as cited in Fisher et al., 2016). In a rural community, it is easier to see the school's long-term impact on the community because the students are generational. Rural teachers teach multiple generations and can see the positive effects of the school on those families. Rural teachers are more than just classroom teachers; they wear many hats in school life (Sawchuk, 2018; Goodpaster, 2012). With these personal connections found through so many different avenues, it is possible that friendship, acceptance, and personal satisfaction offset less flashy working conditions.

The results for RQ3 add to the current body of literature by being another affirming finding that there is a relationship between working conditions and a teacher's intention to remain in the field of education. While in this study, working conditions did not have a relationship with job satisfaction; it did have an impact on whether a teacher would remain in the classroom or pursue other options. It was not an expectation to find that climate was not a factor in teachers' intention to stay in the field for this study. *Climate* is defined as "the quality and character of school life" (National School Climate Counsel, 2022, para 3). The climate is more about attracting teachers to a place, but culture keeps them there. *Culture* is defined as an organization's personality (Gruenert, 2008). It makes sense that a teacher would be willing to remain in the field of education when the school's personality is welcoming and inspiring.

For RQ3, culture, resources, and administration were all found to have an association with teachers' intention to remain in the field. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of the principal and school administration in establishing a culture that lends itself to a positive working environment. Smith et al. (2020) noted that the principal created a climate that attracted and retained good teachers. Teachers are more likely to stay if they feel safe and supported and leave when the administrator does not support them (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Eginli, 2021). Teachers know if administrators support them, so what teachers think about their principal is important. Ansley et al. (2019b) found that this exceptionally influenced job satisfaction. The teacher-principal relationship is integral to job satisfaction and keeping teachers in the schoolhouse.

The results of RQ4 found that three of the four demographic features (age, marital status, highest degree earned) did not predict the intention to remain in the field. I expected teachers' intention to stay in the field in the years of service category. However, it was found that teachers in the middle of their careers, with 15 to 20 years of service, were the most likely to leave the profession. In the survey context, participants were allowed to expound upon some of their answers. Survey Question 35 asked participants how long they planned to remain in teaching and asked them why. Several of the responses cited retirement. One participant stated, "I've got 29 years; I'll finish my working years here." Another respondent in Tier 2 of the retirement system said, "I plan to stay 23 more years. I will take the penalty of retirement. 25, and I am out!" Several other responses contained statements like "I am too close to retirement" or "I'm within five years of retirement." It says a lot about a profession where retirement is a motivator to stay in the field, even when unhappy. It was also discouraging to see responses from new teachers

counting toward retirement. Other factors that make teaching less than desirable include educator's negative outlook on the profession, the public perception that teaching is easy, the role of politics, unfunded mandates, and enrollment competition (Heynoski et al., 2022; We Are Teachers Staff, 2023). With the negativity surrounding the teaching profession, it is no wonder teachers are no longer dedicated to the job.

Finally, it was notable that the teachers in this sample had a high percentage of advanced degrees for such a rural area. Over half of the sample, 53.47%, hold a master's degree, and the state average is 50% (Alabama State Department of Education, 2022). This was not an expected result but was encouraging, showing that rural teachers value education and furthering their learning.

Implication and Future Avenues

While these findings are moderately consistent with the current literature, it would be challenging to generalize them to other school systems, regions, or states. Many factors influence what teachers feel about their careers; some may have nothing to do with the job. The results are trustworthy because they align with the current literature. However, the findings speak directly to the problem this study aimed to investigate – low teacher retention.

The state, local districts, and building principals must continue to bolster efforts to address the basic needs of teachers so they can feel more supported and satisfied with their jobs. With many teachers no longer committed to the workforce, policymakers and local leaders must address teacher retention while caring for the things that keep teachers in the building (Merrimack College, 2023). With the rise of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and secondary trauma stress (STS) diagnoses in teachers, educators should receive mental health support as they continue to deal with the effects of COVID-19, lack of public support, and their negativity about the profession (Heynoski et al., 2022; Bontrager et al., 2012; Stanford, 2023; Congressional Research Service, 2023).

This study highlighted the important role of the school principal, so state and local districts must invest in their principals through quality professional development and mentoring. Levin et al. (2020) reported that 98% of principals want more professional development to help them address teacher and student needs, so it is important that districts take note of that request and invest in their principals (Berry et al., 2012). Luckily, in Alabama, the School Principal and Leadership Act was passed in 2023, and mentoring new administrators has become a priority (Crain, 2023b). Also, Ansley et al. (2019b) noted that the most important thing a principal can do is to take care of their teachers. The principal influences many factors that keep teachers in the school, such as school climate, teacher morale, and positive school performance (Garcia and Wiess, 2019a; Baptiste, 2019; Wood et al., 2013). However, if administrators are trained or mentored to know how to do those things, the cycle of attrition will not be maintained.

The limitations of this study included a small sample size, the instrument being a cross-sectional Likert-style survey, and the timing of the study. Because the study was limited to three rural school systems in a similar geographic area, the results cannot be applied to other school districts. The results can only inform and add to the body of literature about teacher job satisfaction, retention, and attrition. The survey was sent during the first grading period of each district, which may have needed better timing because the beginning of school is traditionally so

busy. Answering a survey is usually not high on a teacher's priority list. The survey was lengthy, with 34 questions, which could have discouraged participation.

A final limitation was the violation of assumptions for the Chi-Square Test of Independence and the ordinal regression model. The Chi-Square violation was between expected and observed frequencies for RQ3. Even after using PCA to create new variables, an error of frequency of less than five was reported even though no cells were empty or missing when examining RQ2 (Lund Research Ltd., 2018).

When conducting the ordinal regression analysis for RQ4, errors were received in categories with zero frequencies but had no missing data. The proportional odds assumption of the ordinal regression model was also violated for the category of years of service. No errors were recorded for RQ1.

Further research on teacher job satisfaction, retention, and educators' mental health is needed. Like Perrachione et al. (2008), it is time to change the conversation from just recruitment to retention and turnover. If the focus remains on getting teachers in the building, but they are not cared for when they arrive, the cycle will stay in place, and the same problems will be repeated in years to come. One prominent way schools can better care for their teachers is to attend to their mental health needs. When 31% of teachers cited personal well-being as a reason to leave the profession and 42% said that their mental health affected their job performance, that should sound an alarm (Bryant et al., 2023; Merrimack College, 2023). More research should be done on the effects of PTSD, STS, and other mental health concerns that stem from a job in education.

Another area that could be explored through the lens of mental health is to examine the impact of specific state initiatives and the effects on those required to implement them. The Alabama Literacy Act (ALA) from 2019 would be an ideal place to begin (Mackey, 2022). The Act requires that all students in K-3 be assessed a minimum of three times per year, and their proficiency on the state assessment determines if they are promoted or retained at the end of third grade. This Act puts teachers' professional judgment on the line because if a student does not pass the test, they must decide if the child has the data for a good cause exemption. This process has become extremely difficult for K-3 administrators and teachers. Also, Fisher et al. (2016) found that retention had a -0.13 effect on student outcomes, and an effect size of 0.40 or higher was connected to a positive impact (Fisher et al., 2016). Teachers are being asked to do something research said was ineffective because of a state law. This juxtaposition is extremely difficult to navigate. The Alabama Numeracy Act (ANA) from 2022 does not have a retention piece, but many requirements are demanding (Alabama State Department of Education, 2023). Investigating if these laws impact teacher retention and job satisfaction would also be meaningful. More importantly, the impact on student mental health should be investigated. The effect on students' mental health and anxiety related to reading and math would also be a deep and complex area to research.

With school choice becoming more commonplace, the public school model must adjust accordingly to keep students at the local community school. However, that can only be done with adequate certified staffing, cooperation with colleges and universities, and pro-public education support at the statehouse. As educators, we must support candidates who support the local school and understand its impact on the community. Universities must stay connected to the local schools to produce students who are well-suited for the classroom, especially in rural schools. It

is time to champion the local rural school, its teachers, and administrators because public school is no longer the only option. As more and more students in Alabama elect to homeschool, public schools are challenged to be seen as viable and inviting options for families (The Homeschool Legal Defense Association, 2024).

Conclusions

Administrators are the heartbeat of the local school. For the betterment of students and the community, teachers and administrators should be treated as professionals who are experts at their craft. Administrators and teachers should be supported, mentored, and respected. Understanding why teachers stay in the field and what drives them away is the only way to address teacher attrition and turnover. If the profession can be made desirable again through increased public support and positive policies, potential candidates will want to take a chance on becoming a teacher. Teacher mental health is a growing concern; this phenomenon is not new. Addressing the teacher's mental health is paramount to keeping good teachers in the building. However, the conversation starts with us, who are currently in the school building. Our attitudes and the way we talk about the profession matter. We must carry the banner for our profession (Casas, 2017). If we as professionals speak about our careers negatively and with no affection, education will continue to suffer, and the rural public schools will pay the price.

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