

Preparing Teachers for Rural Appointments: Lessons from the Mid-continent

Zoe A. Barley

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

Rural schools face difficulties recruiting or retaining qualified teachers. Prospective teachers need help better understanding the nature of rural teaching. Despite many pluses, collegial isolation, low salaries, multiple grade or subject teaching assignments, and lack of familiarity with rural schools and communities are challenges to new teachers in rural schools. This study examined nine mid-continent institutions for five components identified as preparing and retaining teachers to teach in rural schools. From the 120 teacher preparation institutions in the mid-continent, 17 confirmed the existence of a rural program emphasis. Nine of the 17 had three or more rural programs. Three of the nine programs offered options for teachers to receive multiple certifications. As to access, seven of the nine programs offered online courses and four offered courses at more accessible community college campuses. Four of the nine recruited students from rural communities and two programs actively sought student teaching placements in rural schools.

The Conditions of Rural Teaching

Rural schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining new teachers¹, not just as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act's (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002) highly qualified teacher requirements, but also because of teaching conditions unique to rural schools (Monk, 2007). The teachers rural schools recruit must be prepared for the conditions of rural teaching. They not only must have the credentials they need, but they should also be aware of the nature of small schools in small communities. This article provides an overview of the nature of these conditions as background to what teacher preparation programs could consider to prepare teachers for rural schools. The article also shares what teacher preparation programs in seven states in the mid-continent are currently doing to prepare highly qualified teachers to teach in rural schools. Rural conditions can vary greatly across settings. And varying economic conditions can make a major difference from one rural community to the next. While there are many positive aspects of rural teaching such as small class sizes and a closer relationship with parents, we focus on the difficulties to better understand what teacher preparation institutions might do to prepare their graduates for rural teaching. One way to identify potentially problematic rural teaching conditions is to examine teacher turnover. A Canadian study (Murphy & Angelski, 1996/97) sought, in an exploratory inquiry, to understand rural teacher mobility in British Columbia. They surveyed teachers who had terminated their contracts at their own discretion within a single rural district. Teachers indicated that the community's isolation, its distance from family and friends, and the costs of travel to larger communities with shopping opportunities

influenced their decision to stay or leave the rural district. Factors under the control of school administration—such as class size, salary, and supervision—were not viewed as issues. The authors concluded that individuals recruited to teach in a rural district would need to find rural life appealing in order to stay because the factors that influenced teacher satisfaction were community factors, not factors under the control of the school.

The nature of teaching can be different in rural areas than in suburban or urban areas. Because of the small size of rural districts and schools, teachers often need to teach multiple subjects and possibly multiple grades, sometimes in multigrade, mixed-age classrooms. Barrow and Burchett (2000) reported that 49% of rural science teachers in their study had more than four daily preparations. In some rural areas teachers also need to be prepared to teach students with a wide variety of skill levels in the same classroom (such as mainstreamed special education students and English language learners).

Filling Vacancies in Rural Schools

Rural schools reported at a higher rate (at least 4% higher than city, suburban, or town schools) either that it was very difficult or that they were unable to fill vacancies for 4 of 12 teaching areas surveyed, with English as a second language (42.3% reported) and foreign languages (48.7% reported) as the most difficult (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006, revised June 2007, Table 16, p. 43). The differences between rural and non-rural schools are not significant; however, these difficulties can be daunting when the position to be filled may be the only teacher with that specialty in a small rural school.

Strizek, Pittonsberger, Riordan, Lyter and Orlofsky (2006, revised 2007) report that rural schools are slightly more likely than other communities to deal with vacancies by canceling courses (4.1 % of rural schools vs. 2.5% of urban fringe/large town and 3.4% central city) or by assigning an administrator or counselor to teach courses (3.4% vs. 1.5% of urban fringe and 2.1% of central city). Rural schools also hired less-than-qualified teachers more often (17.6 %) than urban fringe schools (14.4 %) but less often than central city (19.2 %). Fortunately, rural districts, except in small schools, have a lower turnover rate. But finding qualified teachers to fill vacancies remains a problem.

Preparing to Teach in Rural Schools

Rural educators have long been asking for special preparation for new teachers to teach in rural schools. Barker and Beckner (1985) conducted a survey of 473 four-year public colleges and universities with teacher training programs about their program’s emphases. The five areas relevant to rural schools they identified are shown in Table 1 in the first column. For this study, the second and fifth areas have been combined under the heading Courses Focused on Rural Conditions. The areas of Being Prepared in Two or More Content Areas and Offering Student Teaching in Rural Schools as identified by Barker and Bekner (1985) have also been included.

Table 1

Areas of emphasis in teacher preparation programs with a role in rural education

Area addressed in teacher preparation programs	Institutions reporting considerable or great emphasis (percent)	Role in rural or all schools	As identified in this study
1. Being prepared in two or more content areas	67.4	More often in rural schools	Options for obtaining multiple-subject certifications
2. Offering special courses related to rural teaching	13.0	Uniquely rural	Courses focused on rural issues
3. Offering practicum or student teaching in a rural setting	28.7	Uniquely rural	Practice teaching placements in rural areas
4. Training in teaching two or more grade levels in the same room	16.5	More often in rural schools	(not included)
5. Training that helps teachers understand the role of the community	64.9	More often in rural schools	Also: courses focused in rural areas

Oeschlager (1979) surveyed a random sample of rural high school principals. Two-thirds indicated that teachers should have the following experiences to prepare them for the dynamics of life in rural communities: developing and adapting curriculum to the needs of students in rural communities, creating self-directed professional development practices, using a variety of resources and technology to reduce the barriers of isolation, and functioning effectively in community service areas other than teaching. Barker and Beckner (1987) and Monk (2007)

saw the need for improving the incorporation of rural teaching into teacher preparation programs. Monk (2007) suggested a “grow your own” strategy, where teacher preparation programs recruit prospective teachers from rural areas, and in some cases make course arrangements to allow them to stay in their area while they pursue their education. Thus, in this study, two new components have been added, Access to Coursework for Current and Prospective Rural Teachers and Recruitment of People Living in Rural Areas for a total of five areas.

Methodology

Publicly available materials were gathered from web sites of the 120 mid-continent teacher preparation institutions. Twenty-eight institutions were selected based on information indicating that their teacher education program addressed teacher preparation for rural schools. A phone call to the education department of each institution found that a rural component could not be confirmed in 11 of the 28 selected institutions and of the remaining 17 programs, only nine were found to have three or more of the five rural program components. Descriptive information on these nine was gathered through in-depth telephone interviews with knowledgeable respondents².

Teacher Preparation Program Components

This section describes the five components as they occurred in the nine institutions.³ Using pseudonyms, there are two colleges (A & B) and seven universities (A through G).

Courses Focused on Rural Conditions

Although Barker and Beckner (1985) indicate that offering courses focused on rural issues could promote an interest in teaching in rural areas, rural coursework was not commonly used to prepare candidates for rural teaching. The primary reason appears to be that many of the institutions are in areas that recruit students already familiar with rural life.

There were a few reported "rural courses," but generally these were in other departments of the university and were not required of teaching candidates. University G offered Sociology of Rural Life for any interested student, and several institutions indicated that rural issues are addressed within their education courses.

Being Prepared in Two or More Content Areas

Prospective rural teachers and those already teaching in rural schools might not be fully qualified for all the subjects they teach as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act, yet they will likely find obtaining needed qualifications difficult. Geographic isolation of rural settings presents a special challenge for teachers already in rural schools. For prospective teachers each of the three programs described in this section has a slightly different approach to offering ways to obtain multiple certifications. One institution focuses on both current and prospective teachers. The other two provide opportunities for prospective teachers only.

At College A, *Partnering Across Regions to Nurture Equity and Relevance* (PARTNERS) prepares in-service teachers for dual endorsements in special education and literacy, language, and culture. This master's level, grant-funded program has trained 60 teachers between 2003 and

2007. It uses both distance learning technology and onsite classes on weekends so that teachers can continue to live in rural communities while obtaining their degree. College A also encourages undergraduates seeking a license in a secondary education content area to look into an additional endorsement, especially in such shortage areas as social studies, math, science, and special education.

University A allows prospective teachers with majors in content-shortage areas to work for school districts while completing their certification requirements. This includes only secondary-level content areas for which endorsements are available to undergraduates.

A respondent from University B reported that the university has "streamlined the program in order to make it easier to get a double major." He noted that about 80 % of students accepted to the teacher education program now seek a double major. "This really speaks to the rural mentality," he noted, because "schools need teachers to do more than one thing." The teacher education program also offers a broad field endorsement, in contrast to a content area endorsement. For example, an endorsement in the broader field of social studies offers more flexibility than an endorsement in a more specific area within that field.

Offering Student Teaching in Rural Schools

Several of these programs require preservice teachers to carry out a practice-teaching placement in a rural school. Three programs explicitly seek opportunities to expose their student-teachers to rural teaching. Other institutions do not deliberately assign student-teachers to rural schools, but these experiences are available through partnerships with a variety of schools. The teacher education programs often are heavily field-based, and the institutions have relationships with both urban and rural schools. Undergraduates in these programs typically have three or four field placements and practica, including student teaching, some in rural schools.

University A, which provides placements mainly in urban settings also partners with rural school districts. A respondent estimated that approximately 40 % of elementary education majors in the university's campus-based program rotate through a rural school at some point. All students in its *Partners in Education* initiative, an undergraduate program in which prospective teachers take classes at a community college partner campus, satisfy the student teaching requirement in a rural school.

University E emphasizes diverse practice-teaching placements. According to respondents, the teacher education program requires undergraduate students to gain experience in both a large and small district. The location of the university ensures that one of these placements will occur in a rural school.

A respondent from University F said, "By virtue of our location, placements are primarily in rural areas. Right now we have 124 student teachers, half elementary and half secondary. Only 12 of the 124 are not in rural areas."

Access to Coursework for Current and Prospective Rural Teachers

Online coursework is an important part of programs that provides access to current and prospective educators living in rural communities. Rural teachers who are not fully qualified who wish to continue to live and work in their rural communities need access to professional development programs to meet the highly qualified teacher provision of the No Child Left Behind Act. Seven of the nine institutions use online courses. In addition, courses offered at community colleges or on satellite campuses bring opportunities closer to rural areas. Four of the nine programs work with community colleges to improve access to coursework.

College A has the only *Rural Education Access Program* (REAP) that has continued to operate beyond the end of its state-funded grant. Participants receive an associate's degree at a junior or community college and then transfer to College A for their final two years of coursework and practice-teaching. A cadre of experienced adjunct faculty delivers instruction onsite at the two-year colleges. Eliminating the need to travel to the College A campus substantially eases entry into the profession for residents in these areas. REAP graduates receive a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies, with state licensure in elementary education. The program emphasizes literacy. Since 2000 the program has awarded degrees to about 250 individuals. College A's *Elementary Education Teacher Preparation Program*, a smaller program with a structure and requirements identical to those of REAP, is a partnership among the College, a community college, and a county school system.

University A offers the *Preparing Educators Together* program, developed in response to rural school district requests for assistance in addressing teacher shortages. It allows students to pursue an elementary education degree and teaching license by taking university coursework on two campuses of a local community college. Improving access to teacher education by eliminating the barrier posed by a long commute, the program offers the one affordable option for a teaching degree in that part of the country. Participants first obtain an associate's degree from a nearby college and then take university core classes at the nearby campus for next three semesters. University A presents courses on one campus, and interactive television technology allows students to participate at a second campus. Graduates receive a bachelor's in education from the university and are licensed to teach preK–6.

University C partners with community colleges, thereby allowing them to offer an associate's degree in teacher education. Students can then transfer to the university as juniors. In addition, the Extended Studies Department has courses almost entirely conducted at a distance. Other "blended" classes combine distance and campus classes and activities. Prospective teachers also have access to

university programs through satellite campuses, including one located in a very rural part of the state.

Recruitment of Prospective Teachers in Rural Areas

Rural recruitment is one way to identify and enroll prospective teachers from rural areas in teacher preparation programs. The idea behind this approach is that teachers recruited from rural areas will be more likely to return to a rural area. Four of the nine institutions offer such programs, sometimes tailored to specific regional needs.

University D has had a program for American Indian students since 1999, graduating 19 educators as of 2007 who are working in their rural American Indian communities. It has also developed a program to recruit minority and bilingual paraprofessionals and enroll them in English as a second language programs.

The university operates the *Indigenous Roots Teacher Education Program*, funded through a \$750,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education, to produce 12–15 certified elementary school teachers to teach in American Indian schools. The program targets American Indian paraprofessionals and other American Indians with experience working with children. Participants must have an associate's degree, though the program allows exceptions. The new instructors are trained to develop curricula that integrate native language and culture, in an attempt to engage students more fully. The hope is to develop role models who will improve students' academic success and motivate them to stay in school. An underlying goal is strengthening the education system in Native communities. Partners in this effort include Native schools in four communities.

Indigenous Roots allows prospective teachers to remain in their communities. There is a core set of classes, though the program is tailored to the individual, where students can take classes at two nearby tribal community colleges. Participants receive stipends, money for books, access to computer labs, and tuition is waived. They work with cooperating teachers and site coordinators who provide mentoring throughout the program. Graduates receive a B.S. in elementary education, with endorsements in K–8 elementary and K–12 English as a second language. They receive assistance in securing their teaching licenses and induction services that include ongoing mentoring. The program builds on the success of an earlier initiative, the *Native American Career Ladder*, whose 19 graduates now serve as classroom teachers or in other leadership roles in their schools and communities.

University D developed the *Para-Educator Career Ladder* project in 2003. It addresses the difficulties facing rural school districts in identifying minority and bilingual teachers by training and granting degrees to paraprofessionals in rural schools. University D's Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education formed a consortium with several partners, including two

community colleges and a state college, to train 30 paraprofessionals. Most of the basic education courses are taken at the community colleges, delivered to participants in their communities, primarily through two-way interactive and other distance education systems, with additional face-to-face sessions each semester. The elementary school paraprofessionals work with a mentor teacher in their home districts beginning in their sophomore year. The first group of participants did their student teaching in fall 2007. Eleven of the participants are expected to graduate with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a supplemental endorsement in English as a second language.

University C uses alternative certification to address teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas. College graduates with the appropriate level of content knowledge can complete required teacher education courses while teaching full time. Faculty meet with candidates to ensure that content area requirements are mastered and then guide participants as they complete a sequence of online courses to satisfy state certification requirements. In 2007, 170 participants were seeking alternative certification, with the highest number of alternative certifications in special education. A respondent pointed out that "rural districts have trouble recruiting and keeping teachers. If you can find a local person with some content specialty and hire them . . . [they] are more likely to stay in their hometown. [This may be] more successful than trying to recruit and retain others who are not from the area."

University B offers post-baccalaureate teacher certification that "really meets a need for rural schools," according to one administrator. The program coordinator added that "[t]he program is ideal for people who want to keep their day jobs while earning a teaching certificate." Candidates with a baccalaureate submit their transcripts for a review of content area coursework. (Gaps in content area coursework must be filled.) The program was created by condensing the institution's teacher education courses and creating three sequential 6-hour online classes. After completing the third class, candidates do their student teaching. The program, which takes a minimum of four semesters to complete, includes some in-school observation during the coursework period and community service learning outside the classroom so that participants gain more experience in working with children.

At College B the *Intensive Post-Baccalaureate Licensure Program* prepares elementary education teachers. Program literature defines prospective candidates as "prospects already teaching in schools on emergency licensures," "prospects working in a school as an aide or volunteer," and "prospects interested in a career change." According to the director, "virtually 100 percent [of the participants] are working in rural sites." A team of four faculty members works closely with a single cohort over a 12-month period that involves face-to-face meetings, online coursework, mentoring, and 15 weeks of practice teaching.

Conclusion

From our investigation of rural teacher preparation in the mid-continent we discovered of 120 institutions that offer teacher preparation 17 confirmed a rural program emphasis, and nine of these have three or more of five components that might help prepare current or prospective teachers. These five areas are courses focused on rural conditions, being prepared in two or more content areas, offering student teaching in rural schools, access to coursework for current or prospective teachers, and recruitment of people living in rural areas.

Only one institution offered courses focused on rural conditions. However, the courses were not required of education majors nor were they department of education courses. Three out of the nine programs offered options for teachers to receive multiple certifications (be prepared in two or more areas).

Two of the nine programs actively sought student teaching placements in rural schools (however, seven of the nine are based in rural areas and naturally have access to rural school placements). Seven of the nine programs offer online courses and four offer courses at more accessible community college campuses; which is important if programs are to provide access to coursework for teachers in rural settings.

Finally, four of the nine programs recruit students from rural communities. This is not a strong showing for an area of the country that is intensely rural. Perhaps this discussion of components that are intended to prepare new teachers for rural teaching and these examples might spur program considerations in universities that serve rural populations. A note of caution, research is needed to evaluate the success of such programs intended to prepare rural people for teaching and programs that prepare teachers who accept positions in rural areas to stay there measured by improved recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools.

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Footnotes

1. Data to back this assertion are hard to find. One indicator is the larger percent (8-10% larger) of teachers teaching out-of-field in small schools (Ingersoll, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education recognized this issue in their

adjustment to the schedule for rural teachers to become highly qualified (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

2. It should be noted that the institutions described in this report are likely not the only ones in the region that make an effort to address preparing teachers to teach in rural areas since the websites may have been incomplete. Second, confirmation of program components for the 28 teacher preparation programs was limited to simply substantiating that rural programming existed, so the report may not accurately represent the programs, and third, no assumptions can be made about whether the components are effective in preparing and placing teachers in rural schools.

3. Pseudonyms have been used in lieu of the names of the institutions.