A shortage of teachers and principals across the United States has intensified in recent years, disproportionately affecting rural communities. Rural schools face significant challenges filling vacancies for educators, leading policymakers to study the causes and seek solutions.

Schools that are considered the most rural are classified as remote, meaning they are 25 miles from an urban center. The more rural the school, the more challenging recruiting and retaining a qualified teacher becomes. Thirty-nine percent of remote schools struggle to fill positions in every subject.

The imbalance between the number of open positions in demand and qualified teachers willing to fill positions in rural America is due in part to insufficient recruitment and retention of teachers, the high number of retiring baby boomers, and fewer college students majoring in education.

Enrollment in education programs declined nationwide—from 719,081 to 464,250 students—between the 2008-2009 and 2013-2014 school years, according to a 2016 report from the Learning Policy Institute, which predicts the teacher shortage could reach 112,000 by 2018. The shortage also includes school principals, with an annual turnover rate of 20 percent nationwide.

An ongoing challenge for rural areas is that their teachers and principals are paid less. The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) revealed that in 2011-2012, rural teachers made an average starting salary of $33,200, compared with the $40,500 earned from an urban center. The more rural the school, also includes school principals, with an annual turnover rate of 20 percent nationwide.

## Tackling Teacher and Principal Shortages in Rural Areas

BY KELLY LATTERMAN AND SARAH STEFFES

A shortage of teachers and principals across the United States has intensified in recent years, disproportionately affecting rural communities. Rural schools face significant challenges filling vacancies for educators, leading policymakers to study the causes and seek solutions.

Schools that are considered the most rural are classified as remote, meaning they are 25 miles from an urban center. The more rural the school, the more challenging recruiting and retaining a qualified teacher becomes. Thirty-nine percent of remote schools struggle to fill positions in every subject.

The imbalance between the number of open positions in demand and qualified teachers willing to fill positions in rural America is due in part to insufficient recruitment and retention of teachers, the high number of retiring baby boomers, and fewer college students majoring in education.

Enrollment in education programs declined nationwide—from 719,081 to 464,250 students—between the 2008-2009 and 2013-2014 school years, according to a 2016 report from the Learning Policy Institute, which predicts the teacher shortage could reach 112,000 by 2018. The shortage also includes school principals, with an annual turnover rate of 20 percent nationwide.

An ongoing challenge for rural areas is that their teachers and principals are paid less. The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) revealed that in 2011-2012, rural teachers made an average starting salary of $33,200, compared with the $40,500 earned from an urban center. The more rural the school, also includes school principals, with an annual turnover rate of 20 percent nationwide.

### Did You Know?

- 8.9 million students attend rural schools and more than one in four schools are rural.
- Rural teachers made an average starting salary of $33,200, compared with their suburban counterparts, who earned $40,500.
- By the end of their third year, 50 percent of principals have left the field.
by their suburban counterparts. The average salary that same year for a rural principal was $80,200, while suburban principals made $101,600. Though cost of living comes into play and can vary significantly, rural districts often find themselves competing with the salaries offered by larger districts.

SASS data also show that in the 2012-2013 school year, the attrition rate for rural teachers was 8.4 percent, compared with 7.3 percent for suburban teachers and 7.9 percent for urban teachers. A study of the challenges facing rural schools finds that because teachers and principals are expected to play multiple roles in these smaller communities, they tend to become over-extended, causing them to resign and discouraging teachers from seeking principal roles.

These high turnover rates are costly for rural school districts. Cost analyses suggest that even when attrition replaces a higher-earning, more experienced teacher, with a lower-earning, less experienced teacher, the cost of replacement mitigates any savings for the school district. High turnover rates for principals are costly as well.

State Action

States are addressing school personnel shortages with a variety of strategies, including recruiting employees from the communities where they live, preparing and supporting teachers, and boosting salary and compensation.

Grow Your Own. Research indicates that one way to combat recruiting and retention challenges is to hire people with personal or long-standing ties to the community. "Grow Your Own" programs recruit community members, such as parents and paraprofessionals, and help them enter the teaching profession.

Bright New Leaders for Ohio Schools, authorized and funded by the Ohio General Assembly, is designed to recruit, train and deliver exceptional leaders to Ohio’s high-poverty public schools. During the year-long fellowship, students work in a school with an accomplished principal and a business leader; earn a Master of Business Administration, and commit to serving as a principal of a high-needs Ohio school for a minimum of two years.

Alaska identified a gap in the percentage of students and teachers who are Alaska Natives. They found that Alaska prepared teachers who have been in the classroom longer than three years have the lowest rates of attrition. Despite this, a significant percentage of their teachers come from out of state. For these reasons, the state implemented a number of Grow Your Own programs, including a statewide initiative, Future Educators of Alaska, that targets middle- and high-school Native Alaskans to consider becoming teachers. The state also incorporates EdRising Academy curriculum into high school courses to introduce young people to the teaching profession.

Arizona’s Mary Lou Fulton Teacher’s College’s Aim2Teach program provides scholarships to high school students interested in an education career.

Preparation and Support. Another challenge for rural educators is that colleges with education programs are often located far away, and may not be targeted toward rural communities’ specific needs. States have addressed this by creating distance learning for prospective teachers, as well as rural residencies that offer more realistic exposure.

South Dakota, for example, established a Blue Ribbon Task Force in 2015 to address a statewide teacher shortage. The University of Alaska Southeast has a B.A. Elementary Education program that allows students to attend classes online and complete their practical education in their home communities. The Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) is a partnership between North Carolina State University and rural school districts that focuses on fostering school leaders.

Salary and Compensation. In addition to providing teachers and principals competitive wages, policymakers are working to offer other compensatory incentives, such as loan forgiveness and housing perks.

Mississippi offers scholarships for prospective teachers and special home loans for teachers who teach in shortage areas. Minnesota allows teachers who teach in shortage areas to receive loan forgiveness of up to $1,000 per year, up to $5,000 total. Montana offers loan forgiveness to licensed teachers in rural schools that are affected by an educator shortage. Qualifying teachers may receive up to $3,000 annually for a maximum of four years.

In 2016, Colorado passed SB 16-104, which creates stipends for student teachers in rural areas. The Colorado Department of Education also provided grant funding for the University of Northern Colorado’s Center for Rural Education, which aims to build a self-sustaining pipeline of new teachers to serve Colorado’s rural communities.

Federal Action

The U.S. Department of Education awards annual Teacher Quality Partnership grants to teacher preparation programs, many for rural teaching residencies. New proposed federal legislation seeks to address the unique challenges rural and Native American communities face. The Rural Educator Support and Training Act and the Native Education Support and Training Act provide professional development and loan forgiveness for teachers currently serving schools in rural and Native American communities, and creates a scholarship program for teachers committed to serving these areas.