Teachers Speak Out: Practitioner Perspectives on the Rural School Teacher Pipeline

Jennifer Seelig, Ph.D.
Katie McCabe, M.S.
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Pre-college Student Interest

Matriculation into College/Teacher Preparation Program

Teacher Preparation Program

Recruitment into Rural Districts

Retention in Rural Districts

Retirement
Question:
If you could select three words that overall represent your teaching career, what would they be?
Building mutually beneficial relationships for higher education and for rural school districts

Common Characteristics
• Relationship between teachers and teacher educators (faculty & researchers)
• Multi-year, embedded, reciprocal
• Institutional supports
• Rural realities, diversities, and assets

Programmatic Examples
• Rural Teacher Residency Program (California State, Chico)
• Montana Rural Colloquium (Montana State, Bozeman)
• Loan forgiveness programs

Biddle & Azano, 2016; Reagan, Hambacher, Schram, McCurdy, Lord, Higginbotham, & Fornauf (2019); Schulte & Justeson, 2019; White & Reid, 2008
Teacher Speakout!

Engaged in Collaborative Dialogue

- Centered Educator Voices
- Expanded Awareness
- Connected Campus and Community
- Exchanged Knowledge
- Respect
- Listen
- Learn
- Appreciate
- Act
Why Stay? The Importance of Rural Teacher Narratives

- Education research typically focused on why teachers leave the profession
- Rural scholarship often focused on why rural residents leave their communities
- Rural teacher narratives flip the model and orient teacher experiences as central to an asset-based approach to rural teacher recruitment and retention

Burton & Johnson, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006
Research Questions

How have current rural educators in Wisconsin experienced their professional preparation? In what way have their experiences prepared them (or not) to work in a rural context?

In what ways can teacher narratives provide insight into the challenges and needs in the rural teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention?
Methods

Semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups

Individual administrator interviews
Participants

- 44 Teachers
- 25 teachers are residents of their district
- 6 teachers were once students in their districts
Student Enrollment

- Iron Ridge: 725
- Timber Lake: 151
- Riverdale: 226
Three Rural District Cases

• What are the community characteristics?
• What are the community challenges?
• What is the role of the school district in the community?
• What are the school’s challenges?

• Why do teachers stay in their rural school districts?
Iron Ridge

Role of School
- "Hub" of the community
- Cultivator of identity and local history
- Gathering place and social connections

Community Descriptors
- Welcoming or inclusive
- Art-focused
- Community is invested in the school
- Historical legacy
- Closest to Madison
- Close proximity to university with a teacher education program

School Challenges
- Administration turnover
- Limited funding
- Resistance to change
- Low teacher salaries

Community Challenges
- Lack of employers
- Middle range housing
- Gap between the have’s and have-not’s
Why Stay in Iron Ridge School District?

✓ Relationships with students and families
✓ Professional relationships
✓ Opportunities to wear multiple hats and take on leadership responsibilities
✓ Positive working environment
✓ Support from the community
✓ Well known and high academic success
Timber Lake

Community Challenges
- Large division between “Haves” and “Have-nots”
- Lack of housing options
- Limited work/career opportunities and distance to amenities

School Challenges
- Local politics & taxes
- Single teachers per grade/subject
- Limited student teachers
- Increasing costs, decreasing revenue

Role of School
- Entertainment
  - “Centerpiece of our town”
  - Keeps the town on the map
  - Community celebrations
  - Student social services

Community Descriptors
- Economy: Outdoor Tourism
  - Significant Second-Home Owners/Seasonal Residents
  - Farthest from Madison
Why Stay in Timber Lake School District?

✓ Professional autonomy in the classroom  
✓ Building meaningful and consistent relationships with students  
✓ Small school experience is desirable for their own children  
✓ Vertical alignment with other teachers across curriculum and student needs  
✓ Nature/outdoors
✓ “You get the right people on the team, overnight you can change the entire culture of the district.”
   (Superintendent/Principal)
Riverdale

Role of School

- A partnership district
- Provide support services to the community
- Center of the community

Community Descriptors

- Multiple townships incorporated into one district
- Organic dairy plant
- Agriculture base
- Supportive and invested in the school

School Challenges

- Single teacher per grade/subject
- Administration and teacher turnover
- Teachers have blurred role as a social worker
- Young staff

Community Challenges

- Limited housing options
- Geographically isolated: “Poverty of access”
- 100 year floods
- Increasing poverty

Role of School

Community Descriptors

School Challenges

Community Challenges
Why Stay in Riverdale School District?

✓ Autonomy in classrooms
✓ Support from district for personal growth
✓ Opportunities to enter into leadership positions
✓ Relationships with students
✓ Family in the area
✓ Commitment to the school and community
### Pipeline Leaks and Patches

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| **Iron Ridge** | New Teacher Retention  
New Teacher Recruitment | PLC time during school day;  
“Matchmaker” or “Fairy Godmother;”  
Offer classes through a consortium of  
districts; personal recruitment; teachers  
recruited from teacher preparation  
programs |
| **Timber Lake** | New Teacher Retention  
New Teacher Recruitment | Rigorous hiring and selection process;  
individually-negotiated salaries; start  
people as subs and then bring them in  
with emergency licensure |
| **Riverdale**   | New Teacher Retention  
New Teacher Recruitment | Post positions early; investing in their  
own teachers; provide teachers with PD  
opportunities that fit their needs;  
upward job mobility within the district |
Asset-Based Reframing

Iron Ridge Case
Cultivator of Local Sustainability

Timber Lake Case
The Equalizer

Riverdale Case
First Responder
Concluding Thoughts

Using an asset-based perspective to foster reciprocal relationships

Support schools in recognizing their deep roots in community as a recruitment and retention tools
Thank You

Jennifer Seelig, Ph.D.  
jseelig@wisc.edu  
Katie McCabe, M.S.  
kmccabe4@wisc.edu