

**University of Alberta**

Teacher Retention in Rural Canadian Communities  
by

Crystal Saunders

A capping exercise submitted to the Faculty of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education  
in  
Educational Administration and Leadership

Faculty of Education

Edmonton, Alberta

August, 11, 2022

### **Abstract**

How might rural northern school divisions attract and retain excellent teachers? Northern communities are faced with many challenges when it comes to attracting and retaining teachers in their rural communities. This study aimed to identify incentives which can support northern school divisions in staffing their schools. While also identifying disincentives which may need to be mitigated to increase retention of teachers in northern areas. Teachers with three or more years of experience in northern schools of 130 students or fewer were chosen for interviews regarding this topic. An inductive approach was used for the analyses of the resulting data and the emergent themes were compared to existing literature. The following themes emerged through this process; career advancement, social integration, positive school culture, accessibility, cost and isolation. It is pertinent northern school divisions leverage the positive aspects of schools within their communities so they can attract more applicants for open positions. Promoting the aspects of rural living which long term staff identify to be incentives could help attract good fit hires for communities within northern areas.

## Table of Contents

Teacher Retention in Rural Canadian Communities .....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Teacher Attrition.....	7
Teacher Retention .....	8
Method .....	10
Design .....	10
Respondent Group .....	11
Data Collection .....	13
Data Analyses .....	14
Limitations .....	15
Findings and Discussion .....	16
Career Advancement.....	16
Social Integration .....	17
Positive School Culture.....	18
Accessibility.....	19
Cost .....	20
Isolation.....	21
Summary .....	22
Conclusions and Recommendations .....	22

References..... 26

Appendix A: Letter of Introduction ..... 29

Appendix B: Consent Form ..... 31

Appendix C: Interview Schedule ..... 32

## **Teacher Retention in Rural Canadian Communities**

Within northern rural communities there is a struggle to recruit and retain excellent teachers (Barley, 2009; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Haar, 2007; Lowe, 2006; Manning et al., 2020; McLean & Saqlain, 2016; Mueller & Carr-Stewart, 2011; See et al., 2020). While research is limited in regards to teacher retention in northern rural areas of Canada, literature from differing rural geographical areas provides an understanding of the experiences of teachers within northern rural communities. Although, generalizations and transferability are limited when looking at specific geographical locations.

Through my fifteen years of experience within the education system both as a teacher and educational leader, high staff turnover rates and small applicant pools for open positions have provided staffing challenges. Consistent turnover has been demonstrated to negatively affect student achievement and well-being (Barley & Beesley, 2007). This is something I have witnessed within my own career working in a rural northern community. Working towards improving recruitment and hiring practices while also identifying areas to increase retention of excellent teachers is important for the sustainability of quality education within rural northern communities. With limited access to resources and hands on experience it is of utmost importance students in the rural north have access to excellent teachers.

Increasing understanding of the challenges faced by teachers working and living in rural northern communities is pertinent to address the issue of staffing northern schools with qualified teachers. Through identifying incentives and disincentives for teachers considering northern teaching positions, hiring personnel can better address the challenges when recruiting applicants for these roles within their school division. The primary guiding research question for this pilot study was: How might northern school divisions attract and retain excellent teachers?

The sub-questions guiding this study included:

- Why do teachers choose to leave northern rural areas of Canada?
- What are incentives which may increase applications for positions in northern areas?
- What conditions support teacher retention?

The purpose for this qualitative study was two-fold. First, I aimed to understand incentives which may increase applications and encourage teachers to accept positions in northern areas. Second, I endeavored to understand the disincentives for teachers when considering northern areas and to identify ways in which to mitigate these.

The topic of teacher retention in northern rural communities is one of significance as there is limited research conducted on the unique aspects of the experiences of schools, staff and students within northern rural areas. This study aimed to help fill the gap within current literature on teacher retention in the northern rural communities of Canada. Furthermore, insight can be gathered into retention and therefore will help inform school divisions regarding action plans to help support longevity in their new hires. Teacher turnover is a costly endeavor for schools and has adverse effects on the engagement of students in their education (Kaden et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Insights on how to improve teacher attrition rates will positively impact learning communities both financially and academically.

### **Literature Review**

Literature pertaining to northern Canadian communities in regards to teacher attrition and retention is minimal, although there are many commonalities which emerge from existing literature for differing rural geographical areas. Literature focusing on teacher attrition and retention in rural areas, as well as implications for incentives and support which could decrease the attrition rates within rural areas, have been addressed.

## **Teacher Attrition**

Often job opportunities in urban areas are a strong draw for many teachers, so “northern communities need incentives for recruiting and retaining teachers to counter the southerly flow of teachers” (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010, p. 871). Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010) found through their research of schools in northern Canada there is a struggle to hire and retain qualified teachers in subject areas such as high school mathematics and science, as well as in elementary Special Education. Often these resulted in teachers teaching subject areas which were not their area of expertise. As well, they found there is a lack of incentives for teachers in urban areas to move into northern school districts. Downes and Roberts (2018) recognized rural teachers are more transient and suggested providing pre-service teachers with rural teaching experiences may increase applications for rural teaching positions in these areas.

Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) discuss the struggles many teachers face in education with work-life imbalance and increased workplace stress. Teaching is a profession that can be highly stressful and create a work-life imbalance for many. Within rural northern communities working conditions can exacerbate the stress factors experienced by teachers. Retention of teachers within rural northern school divisions becomes problematic when living conditions add to the stress teachers face within the teaching profession. These work-life imbalances may influence teachers to move to less isolated areas or leave the teaching profession entirely (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Klassen et al., 2009; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; See et al., 2020).

Rural Indigenous communities face many challenges as well in recruiting teachers for their schools, some deterrents identified in the literature are low salaries, discipline problems, isolation, job security, language and cultural barriers, and distance from larger communities (Manning et al., 2020; McLean & Saqlain, 2016; Mueller & Carr-Stewart, 2011). While rural

schools and Indigenous communities have many overlapping challenges for teacher attrition, the added challenge of language and cultural barriers makes staffing rural Indigenous schools with excellent teachers very difficult. McLean and Saqlain (2016) identified many challenges to new teachers in rural Indigenous areas, some of these being the continually changing nature of school plans due to deaths in the community and weather, changing classroom compositions, multi-grade teaching, and a new culture, all which require a person to experience them to truly understand their effects. Mentorship, rural experience during pre-service teaching, and community support have been identified as positive contributors in supporting teacher attrition in rural Indigenous communities (Manning et al., 2020; McLean & Saqlain, 2016; Mueller & Carr-Stewart, 2011).

### **Teacher Retention**

Barley and Beesley (2007) found through their study of rural schools which they identified as successful, staff retention was an important contributor to their success. Teacher retention has provided stability to their schools and contributes to other factors identified as important to their school achievement. Some other factors identified as contributors to school success were high expectations, learning support, and the use of students' data to inform learning (Barley & Beesley, 2007). It is important to consider schools which already have a successful teaching and learning environment in place will be attractive to teachers seeking employment (Lowe, 2006).

In the literature reviewed, some factors identified in teacher retention in rural areas were: (a) the potential for promotions at a faster rate, (b) feeling as if they belong and are appreciated, (c) dedication and empowerment to help their students, and (d) feeling supported by administration (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Lowe, 2006; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010;



Klassen et al., 2009; Manning et al., 2020; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2011; See et al., 2020). Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010) found there were few incentives in place to encourage teachers to move into northern school districts. The literature identified a broad range of incentives which may attract teachers to move into rural areas such as salary incentives, bonuses, mentorship programs, and increased promotion of the positive aspects of teaching in rural areas (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Klassen et al., 2009; See et al., 2020). This is a limitation requiring more research before any assumptions can be made on effective recruitment practices.

Klassen et al. (2009) focused their research on teachers in the Yukon, but also compared results gained quantitatively to teachers' experiences in western Canada. The qualitative portion of their research provides insight into teachers' efficacy, job stress and satisfaction. Further research of northern communities covering a larger and more diverse geographical area would determine if the findings are consistent among northern communities. Klassen et al. (2009) imply connections with the community and social integration play a vital role in the feeling of satisfaction and stress at work in rural areas. If more extensive research were done in this area to confirm these results, implementing support for new teachers in rural areas to promote social integration and building community relationships may help improve the retention of teachers.

The overview of the research highlighted teacher retention as greatly impacting the success of a school. Student academic achievement is thought to be directly affected by the attrition rate of teachers in rural school settings (Kaden et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). While there are many factors consistently identified throughout the literature to identify why teachers leave rural areas, the literature does not provide a clear resolution for this continuing problem faced by rural schools. There are many suggestions throughout the literature, but they rarely

directly address one of the consistent causes of teacher attrition identified which is a positive, supportive work environment. Most research concludes a supportive, positive, successful school environment is an environment teachers seek for long term employment (Ashton & Duncan, 2013; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Downes & Roberts, 2018; Haar, 2007; Kaden et al., 2016; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Klassen et al., 2009; See et al., 2020; Klinger et al., 2012).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) identified “creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect among all groups and interested parties in a school” (p. 1036) as an important factor in teacher retention. Ashton and Duncan (2013) also discussed the importance of schools within small rural communities and the need for a positive rapport with the community. When teachers feel supported and have positive relationships developed within the community it is more likely they will become long term employees. Downes and Roberts (2018) discussed as well positive school leadership and supportive school environments are reasons teachers may choose to work and stay within rural schools.

### **Method**

This study was conducted to gain understanding of how northern schools can attract and retain excellent teachers. Teachers were selected to answer questions regarding incentives and disincentives that influenced their decisions to teach with rural northern school divisions. The respondents’ answers help provide a deeper understanding of why teachers choose to teach in rural northern communities as well as reasons why they choose to move to urban areas.

### **Design**

The qualitative research study draws on phenomenological and grounded theory techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents and through an inductive phase analysis, the resulting notes and transcripts were used to determine emergent

themes. Rich data gathered from the three respondents were used to identify these emergent themes through an inductive approach.

### **Respondent Group**

For the purposes of this study, participants were selected based upon their teaching experience. Teachers with three or more years of teaching experience within northern rural Canada were identified with a preference for those who had left rural teaching to move into an urban center. Respondents were identified through my connections with working in rural northern communities. All respondents worked within K-12 schools with 130 students or less during their time teaching in rural northern communities within Alberta. All three respondents also worked in Northern Alberta in communities approximately two hours from services such as grocery stores and health care. These services were accessible by a paved highway, although some of the communities in which the respondents worked required them to travel for six or more kilometers off the highway unto poorly maintained gravel roads. The communities in which they worked had minimal services available, there was an ambulance service for emergencies and small stores offering some basic necessities albeit at a higher cost than in a community with larger retail stores.

Having received ethics approval from the University of Alberta. The next step was to apply for research approval within the school division of interest. Upon receiving approval of my research request from the school division, an email message was sent to possible participants to ask if they were willing to participate in my research. Of the six emails sent I received three replies all of whom were willing and able to participate in my data collection interviews. A second email message was sent to the respondents including the letter of information, consent form, and interview schedule (see Appendices A, B, and C). Interview schedules were sent to

participants at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled interview. I received consent forms from all three participants in advance of the interviews. All three of the participants also provided verbal consent prior to beginning the interview. For the purposes of reporting the findings of this qualitative study pseudonyms have been assigned to the three participants.

Kelly worked within a northern school division for ten years, these years of experience were within two different schools. The first school was on a reservation and she taught there for four years. The second rural school was a nearby school within a public school division in which she worked for six years. Kelly had since moved on to teach in a school further south for the past three years. The respondent was originally from a rural area in Eastern Canada albeit not as isolated as the communities in which she worked within Northern Alberta. This respondent originally accepted a position in the north because she had family members who lived and worked in the area. She also moved to the north with her partner who found a job once they arrived. At the time of the interview Kelly had a total of thirteen years of teaching experience throughout grades one to six.

Sophie had eight years of teaching experience in Northern Alberta, along with substituting experience in an urban center. The respondent has spent all eight years of teaching within a public school division. The respondent continues to work within a northern school division and has experience as the special education facilitator along with teaching. The respondent was originally from an urban area in Eastern Canada and moved to Northern Alberta with no previous connections to the area. Sophie didn't have any friends or family in the area, although she did have family who lived further south. She moved to the north with her partner who found a job upon their arrival. In total Sophie had ten years of teaching experience at the time of the interview from grades three through nine.

Avery worked in multiple northern school divisions during her five years of teaching in the north. The respondent was originally from a rural area in Eastern Canada albeit not as isolated as the communities in which she worked within Northern Alberta. She had moved to an urban area within Alberta to obtain her teaching degree prior to moving to Northern Alberta. Avery spent her first-year teaching on a reservation and the next four years teaching within public school divisions. Avery originally accepted a position in the north because she had a friend that lived and worked in the school where she had accepted her first teaching assignment. She moved to the north on her own but met a partner while living and working there, they have since moved further south. Avery has been teaching within a school division further south for the past six years. At the time of the interview Avery had a total of eleven years of teaching experience throughout kindergarten to grade eight.

### **Data Collection**

As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 108). Therefore, as the purpose of this study was to identify in-depth information around respondents’ thoughts, feelings and understandings of past events in their lives, one-on-one semi-structured interview techniques were utilized. Each interview was digitally recorded to ensure access to the audio as well as the transcript during data analyses.

Each interview began with a reminder of the purpose of the study. The remainder of the interview schedules (see Appendix C) were planned around gathering information in relation to the respondents’ experiences with accepting and resigning from a teaching position within a northern rural Canadian school division. Following Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) guidelines for

asking good questions, types of questions and questions to avoid, an interview schedule was drafted. The interview schedule was then practiced with colleagues and final adjustments and modifications were made prior to beginning the interviews for this pilot study. During the interview process, the intent of the questions was followed, but at times adjustments were made to the order of questioning as well some were skipped if the answer was already provided. These adjustments were made so as to not disrupt a respondent's chain of thought and to ensure an in-depth response was provided before changing the line of inquiry. As I listened to the answers provided by respondents, notes were taken to ensure I could summarize the ideas being presented and ask for clarification where needed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated "probing can come in the form of asking for more details, for clarification, for examples" (p. 122).

### **Data Analyses**

As stated in my research design, inductive analysis was used to determine common themes and emerging theory from the notes and transcripts resulting from the digitally recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) when beginning the analyses process the purpose of the study should be considered. The overarching theme of the qualitative pilot study was to identify how a rural school division can attract and retain excellent teachers through identifying the incentives which would draw teachers to such a position and disincentives which could possibly be mitigated against to increase the applicant pool. Secondly, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify thinking "about the lens of the epistemological framework" (p. 207) used for the data analyses. For the purpose of this study a phenomenological theoretical framework is drawn upon to determine how people have experienced being hired and working in a northern rural community and what experiences in the process motivated or demotivated individuals to become long-term employees in northern rural

schools. I began the coding process by first reading through the transcripts and jotting down notes, comments and observations in the margins. Through the process of open coding, I then went back through the comments and notes and began grouping them into common themes through the process of analytical coding.

### **Trustworthiness Issues**

In an aim to increase the credibility of the study, steps were taken to ensure accurate representation of participants views. Consent was received prior to the scheduled interviews, an information letter was sent out (see Appendix A), and interview schedules (see Appendix C) were also provided to all participants at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled interview time. Each interview transcript was compared to the audio recordings ensuring accuracy of the words spoken by participants. Within five days of each interview member checks (Guba, 1981) were completed by sending the transcripts and a summary of the interview to each participant for review.

### **Limitations**

At the onset of data collection, I assumed from my experience as a teaching principal in Northern Alberta the consistent turnover in teaching staff negatively impacts students' social, emotional, and academic success. From my own experiences many hires come to rural communities to gain a few years of experience so they can move on to positions in larger centers. I assumed rural communities lacked incentives to draw high quality teacher applicants and often during the hiring process they are left to settle for the most compatible but not the ideal candidate for the position being hired. My own assumptions were mitigated against through conducting member checks to ensure participants views were accurately portrayed.

Confirmability may also have been improved if more participants were interviewed. Due to time constraints three participants were interviewed for the purposes of gathering data for this study. Due to new ideas and themes emerging during each interview, data-saturation (Guba, 1981) had not been reached. If more interviews had taken place with participants of differing life and professional experiences a wider breadth of ideas may have been found during the data analyses phase.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The following themes regarding incentives and disincentives arose through the data analyses and literature review process; career advancement, social integration, positive school culture, accessibility, cost and isolation. These emergent themes are some incentives and disincentives faced by teachers who consider working in rural northern communities and by those teachers who are considering moving to an urban area. Some of the themes provided incentives to stay but at times provided some disincentives as well.

#### **Career Advancement**

The opportunity for rapid career advancement was expressed by two of the three participants as an incentive for working and staying in a rural teaching position for an extended time. Avery said “a deciding factor for me to move to a rural school division was the opportunities it would provide to enhance my experience and resume in areas other than teaching” (Lines 43-44). Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010) also discussed this finding within their study stating “many stressed that they realized that their career advancement was faster in their present locations and that they were well paid for their work” (p. 889).

School divisions providing adequate professional development relevant to the teaching staff's career aspirations may provide an incentive for prospective hires as well as the longevity



of current staff within northern rural schools. Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010) discussed while many participants were tempted to move south to be closer to amenities, they knew their current position would provide faster career advancement. Avery stated “I knew it would kind of be easier to get my foot in the door . . . a quicker road to get in contract experience” (Lines 45-46). This was a deciding factor or incentive for participants in both Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf’s (2010) research as well as for participants in this study.

### **Social Integration**

The ability to socially integrate into the community and build lasting connections was identified by all three participants as a main factor for staying within a rural northern community for three or more years. Participants observed colleagues who had come and gone within the schools they had worked, often they struggled with integrating themselves in the culture and activities within the broader community. Kelly stated “colleagues I’ve worked with in the north who struggled with building connections both in the school and the community often didn’t last long” (Lines 362-364). Kaden et al. (2016) stated, “overall, findings indicate that working conditions, leadership, and community integration separate from student-body characteristics are important factors of teacher retention” (p. 143). Klassen et al. (2009) and Lowe (2006) also identify the importance of community integration and the effects both positively and negatively this aspect has on the experience of teachers coming into a northern rural community. Lowe (2006) specifically outlines ways in which to begin the integration process immediately after a contract is signed and states “a little bit of relationship building will go a long way toward fostering positive attitudes and feelings of belonging among teachers when they arrive in their new surroundings” (p. 30). Sophie stated “I also had the opportunity of talking to some of the

teaching staff prior to accepting the position . . . that definitely helped . . . the admin being open to allowing those other conversations to take place” (Lines 70-75).

### **Positive School Culture**

Working in a school environment which was supportive, collaborative and positive was a common theme among all respondents in this study. Positive school culture was a contributing factor as to why respondents remained in a school for three or more years, and a reason Kelly and Sophie left a teaching position in one rural school to teach in another rural community nearby. They both sought to move to a school which had a reputation for good programming, opportunities for professional development and a positive school atmosphere. Avery said:

I didn't consider leaving the position I held in [Northern Village] for quite a while, I worked there for eight years. Not only were the opportunities available for career advancement, we (the staff) worked well as a team, we enjoyed collaborating with each other and everyone was always willing to step up and help in any situation. (Lines 69-73)

School culture and a sense of belonging has been identified in the literature as a factor positively affecting teacher attrition rates in rural communities (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Haar, 2007; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Klassen et al., 2009; Lowe, 2006; Malloy & Allen, 2007). Haar (2007) noted “factors that kept good teachers included a sense of appreciation and support for their work, an environment that allowed them to learn from their colleagues and an environment where accomplished teaching could flourish and grow” (p. 28). It is evident a positive, supportive working environment is a workplace teachers seek out and has a tendency to retain teachers for longer periods of time.

## **Accessibility**

All respondents identified accessibility as a disincentive they considered when both deciding to take a northern rural teaching position as well as in their decision to leave or stay within a rural community. Accessibility to health care, extracurricular activities, shopping, airports and pharmacies were just some of the items identified. Also included here was accessibility to the communities in northern rural areas as many are only accessible by gravel roads and in even more remote areas a winter road, barge or plane. This disincentive was a common theme for why many thought twice about accepting a rural teaching position as well as why all respondents would or have considered leaving a position within a rural community. Kelly stated “anywhere that has any sort of groceries, or even a doctor is quite a distance . . . to receive any services . . . when you have kids you can’t put them in hockey or . . . baseball as conveniently as . . . in a city center” (Lines 59-64).

It is important to note Kelly and Avery also spoke of accessibility in rural communities as an incentive in some instances. For example, opportunities such as having quick access to outdoor recreational activities including fishing, quadding, sledding and camping. Kelly stated “I like quiet . . . that’s kind of what I was looking for . . . and we enjoy camping and fishing so it is great that opportunities for outdoor activities you don’t have to go far” (Lines 47-50). Depending on the interests of individuals this category could be either an incentive, disincentive or both.

Klassen et al. (2009) also identified accessibility as both an incentive and disincentive which was found within the themes of their research. “Teachers in our study emphasized how the physical and human geographical context influenced job stress and satisfaction” (p. 389). Within their study proximity to outdoor recreation opportunities was an influence on job satisfaction

while availability of resources and difficulty traveling south lead to increased job stress (Klassen et al., 2009). Klassen et al. (2009) also noted the effects of this was different for respondents, some did not feel the effects of accessibility as they moved from similar areas with limited resources, while others who had come from areas with readily available resources felt the effects more predominantly. Kelly also stated “I attended a rural school, so I kind of had that experience. What it was like to be a student in a school, in a rural community” (Lines 41-42).

### **Cost**

Two of the three respondents identified the cost of moving to and living in a rural northern community as a disincentive they considered prior to accepting a teaching position and staying within their teaching position in a northern rural community. Sophie stated:

I had a car and the position I was offered was in a community only accessible by driving quite a few kilometers on a poorly maintained gravel road. I wasn't sure if it was feasible after just graduating from university to purchase a vehicle that could hold up to the road conditions. (Lines 84-87)

The cost for students who are just entering into teaching can be quite high. For those considering moving to rural northern areas the cost may be too high for those fresh out of university to justify a move to the north. While the benefits of having a full-time teaching position right out of school may entice some applicants, the task of preparing and moving to a northern rural community may cost too much for an applicant to make the final decision to accept a position. Avery noted:

The cost of living in the north is quite high and getting worse, the amount of fuel needed to drive two hours each way to purchase groceries, access health care (dental, optometrist, emergencies and regular health check-ups), pick up prescriptions and

provide extracurricular experiences for my child became quite expensive. (Lines 157-160)

For those who do overcome the initial costs to move to a rural northern community the high cost of living may deter them from staying for an extended period of time. As teachers grow their own families the cost to provide opportunities for their children adds financial strain.

The cost of living in the north was not a common theme discussed within the literature. Often, within the literature higher salaries was an incentive of working in rural communities. Although, it was identified isolation from necessities such as health care and shopping were a disincentive for staying in rural areas (Klassen et al., 2009; Kitchenham & Chasteaunuef, 2010). This may be due to the respondent group in this study having worked in rural northern communities but not within school divisions far enough north or isolated enough to provide salary incentives or northern living bonuses. Therefore, for the respondent group the cost of accessing these necessary resources were without any pay incentives to compensate for the cost of this regular travel.

### **Isolation**

All respondents identified isolation as a disincentive to both accepting a position in a rural northern community as well as a reason to consider leaving. Isolation from necessary resources could be considered part of this, but the predominant isolation factor discussed was distance from extended family. Avery stated “something as simple as our calendar . . . if those breaks aren’t timed in an appropriate way for people to actually go visit family . . . then why would you stay?” (Lines 186-189). Working in a rural northern community meant respondents only saw their parents, nieces, nephews and siblings usually once per year. The cost of traveling has increased dramatically over the years which limits the occasions in which respondents get to

travel to visit their extended family. It is important to note the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused this to be of increased importance to respondents as travel has been restricted in recent years which has increasingly limited the ability to travel and visit parents and other members of their extended families. Although, isolation was also a factor identified by Klassen et al. (2009) as respondents in this study discussed being far from home and their families.

### **Summary**

Teachers who may apply for teaching positions in rural northern communities have many factors to consider. Depending on the persons lived experiences a teaching position within a rural area may or may not be a good fit. The findings during this study suggest school divisions or schools who provide opportunities for career advancement and a positive school culture are more likely to attract teachers. It is also important to note teachers who are provided the support or have the opportunity to experience positive social integration from the onset are more likely to become long term employees of rural schools. Accessibility to lifestyle choices such as hunting, fishing and camping are also incentives for those who enjoy outdoor recreational activities.

It is also important to note factors in which provide disincentives for teachers who are contemplating accepting a rural northern teaching position. The accessibility of a community, the cost to live and travel there, as well as the amount of isolation felt will all greatly impact the retention of teachers in a rural area. Finding ways to mitigate these disincentives will be an important endeavor for the recruitment and hiring process of rural northern school divisions.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Northern rural school divisions continually face high staff turnover which leads to high costs for human resource development and negatively affects student achievement (Kaden et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). There are many factors which contribute to both positive and

negative experiences for those who choose to work in northern rural school divisions.

Recruitment practices promoting the positive aspects of living and working in northern rural communities may help increase applications for these areas.

Beginning relationship building from the onset of hiring (Lowe, 2006) by supporting new staff in the areas of community integration and forming positive relationships with the greater community can possibly help ensure longevity of new hires. It is pertinent for school leaders to build these relationships in the beginning and then support new hires in forming their own positive relationships as they become increasingly integrated with the school staff, students, parent and divisional leaders. This emergent theme is the initial step in supporting new hires to become long term employees as the type of relationships teachers have with colleagues, students, parents and the community tend to determine the level of success they feel or experience within their teaching career.

It is important to take the time as a school leader to develop a sense of appreciation amongst the school staff. Although, appreciation is not in and of itself enough to develop the school culture necessary to retain teachers' long term. It is also important to develop a collaborative and supportive school environment in which teachers feel comfortable in taking risks to improve their teaching practices. When staff feel appreciated, they tend to put forth their best work and are more apt to want to remain within a positive work environment.

For many teachers' the opportunity for expedited career advancement can entice them to rural northern communities, while short-term contracts and job stability due to decreasing enrollment can also be a deterrent (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Kaden et al., 2016; Klassen et al., 2009; See et al., 2020). Recruitment practices may be improved if the opportunities for professional development and support to achieve higher education were advertised by school

divisions. Many quality teachers are looking for positions that offer them the ability for further growth professionally. Northern rural school divisions who take the time to develop a comprehensive plan for professional development and communicate this plan effectively may increase their success with recruiting excellent teachers for their schools.

Promoting and developing the incentives which draw teachers to northern rural schools is one way in which school divisions may improve their success in recruiting teachers. It is also important for school divisions to consider disincentives and mitigate these to support teachers in overcoming these obstacles when considering accepting northern rural teaching positions.

Accessibility to rural northern communities can have its disadvantages, but there are also advantages to this lifestyle. If rural school divisions take the time to develop comprehensive communication practices to promote the positive aspects of isolated living, they may find an increase of applicants who enjoy the lifestyle rural communities provide. Focusing on aspects such as tight knit family atmospheres and easy accessibility to outdoor recreational activities can take the focus off of the negative aspects of living in remote areas and shift the focus to aspects of the location which is a positive for many who would be a good fit for rural living.

Isolation from family and the ability or lack thereof to get back to visit them frequently can greatly impact teachers' decisions to accept or resign from a rural northern school. This disincentive is also exacerbated by the high costs associated with living in northern rural communities. This includes high costs to travel for necessities such as groceries and health care. Again, school divisions would be better situated in recruiting qualified teachers if communication regarding any contractual incentives available to mitigate this concern were advertised. Whether it be claiming a northern living allowance on taxes, the ability to claim travel expenses, northern living allowances, or allowances for moving costs.



Teacher retention has been an issue for rural northern areas for a long time (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Klassen et al., 2009). It is important to note there is not a one size fits all for any of the themes arising. People have varying personalities and different life experiences. District leaders of northern rural school divisions may need to focus more of their recruitment efforts on communicating the positive aspects of living and working within their communities. Taking the time to develop comprehensive information packages with incentives of working within their school divisions as well as positive aspects of each of their communities may help increase applicant pools. The best any school leader can do is to continually strive to create a positive school culture, communicate the benefits of being a part of their school team and during the hiring process steer towards those applicants who exhibit personalities which are most compatible with living and working in a northern rural climate. Further research to identify incentives which may address the reasons teachers leave rural areas will help with teacher recruitment initiatives.

## References

- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2013). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *The Rural Educator, 34*(1), 1-13.
- Barley, Z. A. (2009). Preparing teachers for rural appointments: Lessons from the mid-continent. *The Rural Educator, 30*(3), 10-15.
- Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007, January 10). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(1), 1-16.
- Downes, N., & Roberts, P. (2018). Revisiting the schoolhouse: A literature review on staffing rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia 2004-2016. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 28*(1), 31-54.
- Guba, E. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *ECTJ, 29*(2), 75-91.
- Haar, J. M. (2007). Retaining experienced, qualified teachers: The principal's role. *The Rural Educator, 28*(2), 28-34.
- Kaden, U., Patterson, P. P., Healy, J., & Adams, B. L. (2016). Stemming the revolving door: Teacher retention and attrition in Artic Alaska schools. *Global Education Review, 3*(1), 129-147.
- Kitchenham, A., & Chasteauneuf, C. (2010). Teacher supply and demand: Issues in northern Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education, 33*(4), 869-896.
- Klassen, R. M., Foster, R. Y., Rajani, S., & Bowman, C. (2009). Teaching in the Yukon: Exploring teachers' efficacy beliefs, stress and job satisfaction in a remote setting. *International Journal of Educational Research, 48*(6), 381-394.
- doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2010.04.002

- Klinger, D. A., Volante, L., & DeLuca, C. (2012). Building teacher capacity within the evolving assessment culture in Canadian education. *Policy Futures in Education, 10*(4), 447-459.
- Kutsyruba, B., Walker, K. D., Stasel, R. S., & Makhamreh, M. A. (2019, July). Developing resilience and promoting well-being in early career teaching: Advice from the Canadian beginning teachers. *Canadian Journal of Education, 42*(1), 285-321.
- Lowe, J. M. (2006). Rural education: Attracting and retaining teachers in small schools. *The Rural Educator, 27*(2), 28-32.
- Malloy, W. W., & Allen, T. (Winter 2007). Teacher retention in a teacher resiliency-building rural school. *The Rural Educator, 48*(2), 19-27. doi:10.35608/ruraled.v28i2.482
- Manning, R., Steeves, L., Osmond-Johnson, P., Furuta, S., & Steward, S. C. (2020). Teacher recruitment, retention and pedagogical issues confronting Indigenous students and communities in Northern Saskatchewan schools. In J. M. Reyhner, L. Lockard, & W. S. Gilbert (Eds.), *Honoring our students* (pp. 145-163). Northern Arizona University.
- McLean, S. N., & Saqlain, N. (2016). Teacher recruitment in rural Aboriginal communities. *The Manning Watch: Educational & Social Analysis, 44*(1-2), 1-8.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Mueller, R., & Carr-Stewart, S. (2011). Teacher recruitment and retention in select first nations schools. *Indigenous Education in Education, 17*(3), 56-71.
- Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. (2017, Winter). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *Rural Educator, 38*(1), 6-15.
- Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 50*(1), 4-36. doi:10.3102/0002831212463813

See, B. H., Morris, R., Gorard, S., Kokotsaki, D., & Abdi, S. (2020). Teacher recruitment and retention: A critical review of international evidence of most promising interventions.

*Education Sciences*, 10(262), 1-45. doi:10.3390/educi10100262

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(6), 1029-1038.

doi:10.1016/j.tate.2011.04.001

## Appendix A



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### Letter of Introduction - Individual Interview - Adult Participant

Crystal Saunders  
 MEd Graduate Student  
 Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3  
 780.649.0415  
 cdsaunde@ualberta.ca

February 10, 2022

*Participants Name*  
 Red Earth Creek, Alberta T0G 1X0

Dear *Participants Name*,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter to you is to take part in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to answer how northern rural school divisions can attract and retain excellent teachers. Your participation would involve one thirty-minute interview. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will be conducting qualitative research by analyzing a series of interviews. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by February 25, 2022 and I will destroy all data.
- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Should any concerns, complaints, or questions arise from your participation, you may contact me or my instructor, Dr. Jose da Costa (jdacosta@ualberta.ca).

Educational Policy Studies

---

7-104 Education North • University of Alberta • Edmonton • Canada • T6G 2G5  
 Telephone: (780) 492-7625 • Fax: (780) 492-2024

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked in a filing cabinet and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to [cdsaunde@ualberta.ca](mailto:cdsaunde@ualberta.ca) by February 12, 2022. I have included two copies of the consent form: one is to be signed by you and the other is for your own records.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one on your request.

Sincerely,

Crystal Saunders  
Graduate student in the Master of Educational Leadership  
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta  
780-649-0415  
[cdsaunde@ualberta.ca](mailto:cdsaunde@ualberta.ca)

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

Educational Policy Studies

---

7-104 Education North • University of Alberta • Edmonton • Canada • T6G 2G5

Telephone: (780) 492-5868 • Fax: (780) 492-2024

E-mail: [Jose.da.Costa@ualberta.ca](mailto:Jose.da.Costa@ualberta.ca)

## Appendix B



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### Adult Participant Consent Form

**EDPS 509 Research Assignment:** How might northern rural school divisions attract and retain excellent teachers?

**Researcher:** Crystal Saunders

**Date Range of Research:** February 10, 2022 to March 31, 2022

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research how might northern rural school divisions attract and retain excellent teachers.

I understand that my participation includes:

- any interview for thirty minutes with Crystal Saunders.
- audio and video recording of the interview.

As per the Letter of Information, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may withdraw from the research without penalty until February 25, 2022
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

Educational Policy Studies

## Appendix C

### Interview Schedules

Crystal Saunders  
Med Graduate Student  
Educational Policy Studies  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3  
780.649.3898  
[csaunde@ualberta.ca](mailto:csaunde@ualberta.ca)

**Participant:** Kelly

**Interview Date:** February 12, 2002

**Interview Time:** 10:30 am

**Research Question/Introductory Statement:**

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and answer some questions to support my research efforts. The purpose of the research study is to understand incentives that may attract teachers to a rural school division as well as some disincentives that influenced teachers when considering positions in a rural school division. Please be aware that you can choose not to answer any question, you may opt out of the research participation if you choose to do so, please let me know by February 25. I will also follow up with an email summarizing the main points I understood you to make and my interpretation of them. Just so you are aware this recording is being used for transcription purposes only, your name will not be revealed and all data and materials will be locked in a secure location. Are you okay with continuing on into the interview?*

**Interview Questions:**

- Describe your experience when applying for teaching positions.
- What were some incentives you considered when deciding to take a position in a northern rural school?
- What were some disincentives you considered when deciding to take a position in a northern rural school?
- What determining factors lead to your decision to accept a position in a rural northern school?
- Describe your experience working in a northern rural school. How has the experience impacted your decision to stay in a rural school division?
- What factors do you feel contributed to your career choices thus far?



Crystal Saunders  
Med Graduate Student  
Educational Policy Studies  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3  
780.649.3898  
[csaunde@ualberta.ca](mailto:csaunde@ualberta.ca)

**Participant:** Sophie

**Interview Date:** March 28, 2022

**Interview Time:** 8:00 pm

**Research Question/Introductory Statement:**

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and answer some questions to support my research efforts. The purpose of the research study is to understand incentives that may attract teachers to a rural school division as well as some disincentives that influenced teachers when considering positions in a rural school division. Please be aware that you can choose not to answer any question, you may opt out of the research participation if you choose to do so, please let me know by April 10. I will also follow up with an email summarizing the main points I understood you to make and my interpretation of them. Just so you are aware this recording is being used for transcription purposes only, your name will not be revealed and all data and materials will be locked in a secure location. Are you okay with continuing on into the interview?*

**Interview Questions:**

- Describe your experience when applying for teaching positions.
- What were some incentives and disincentives you considered when deciding on taking a position in a northern rural school?
- What determining factors lead to your decision to accept a position in a rural northern school?
- Describe your experience working in a northern rural school. How did the experience impact your decision to move to an urban area?
- Describe your teaching experience since moving to an urban setting. Are you feeling confident this was the best decision for you?
- What factors do you feel contributed to your career choices thus far?

Crystal Saunders  
Med Graduate Student  
Educational Policy Studies  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3  
780.649.3898  
[csaunde@ualberta.ca](mailto:csaunde@ualberta.ca)

**Participant:** Avery

**Interview Date:** April 2, 2022

**Interview Time:** 3:30 pm

**Research Question/Introductory Statement:**

*Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and answer some questions to support my research efforts. The purpose of the research study is to understand incentives that may attract teachers to a rural school division as well as some disincentives that influenced teachers when considering positions in a rural school division. Please be aware that you can choose not to answer any question, you may opt out of the research participation if you choose to do so, please let me know by April 10. I will also follow up with an email summarizing the main points I understood you to make and my interpretation of them. Just so you are aware this recording is being used for transcription purposes only, your name will not be revealed and all data and materials will be locked in a secure location. Are you okay with continuing on into the interview?*

**Interview Questions:**

- Describe your experience when applying for teaching positions.
- What were some incentives and disincentives you considered when deciding on taking a position in a northern rural school?
- What determining factors lead to your decision to accept a position in a rural northern school?
- Describe your experience working in a northern rural school. How did the experience impact your decision to move to an urban area?
- Describe your teaching experience since moving to an urban setting. Are you feeling confident this was the best decision for you?
- What do you think rural school divisions can do to increase their applicant pool and retention of teachers?