

**University of Alberta**

Developing and Retaining Quality Educators in Small Schools

by

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## **Abstract**

This case study was conducted to gain insights into the attraction and retention of teachers in small schools. The research question posed was "how do leaders ensure small schools have access to highly qualified educators?" This case study drew on a grounded theory research paradigm combined with a critical research approach. Three respondents within the Peace River School Division (PRSD) were interviewed. Following the interview, data from the transcripts were coded and categorized into five themes: colleague support, job security, home, job satisfaction, and change of assignment. These data were then analysed and synthesized to form conclusions about what sort of environments encourage teachers to remain employed by a school or division. Teachers who feel supported, valued, empowered, connected and respected are more likely to stay. Following these conclusions, this study provides a number of actions for school-based and central office staff to consider when setting policy and planning. It is recommended that principals and central office staff develop policies that are flexible and responsive to the personal needs of teachers as well as to be proactive and plan ahead regarding staffing assignments.

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### **Developing and Retaining Quality Educators in Small Schools**

As the demographic profile of communities in rural Alberta changes, farms are getting larger, and communities are reducing in population (Government of Alberta, 2010). This means many schools in rural Alberta deal with shrinking populations. A population-based funding model means lower funding and, therefore, a reduced capacity for staffing. This shift puts rural school leaders in a position where they may struggle to meet the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 3)(LQS), stating leaders must develop a "culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning" (du Plessis, 2017). Within this changing demographic, leaders must "find new and creative ways and means of encouraging the types of changes that will bring about changed mindsets - a paradigm shift - about the nature of listening, teaching as a process and a profession" (Duignan, 2020, p. 6). A significant element of this paradigm shift would include a renewed focus on effective relationships where school staff learn and grow professionally, collaborate, and utilize the human resources available (Alberta Education, 2020).

Given these challenges, it is incumbent upon school leaders to assume competence within their professional staff and work on ways to encourage them to remain. Through consistency and reduced turnover, small schools can hope to develop their teachers into teachers who meet the needs of their community. For leaders to ensure small schools have access to highly qualified educators, they must ensure they can foster effective relationships as per the LQS. Leaders cannot afford to develop new collegial relationships year after year nor help teachers understand the specific contexts of a small school community each year.

## **Research Question**

This research study was guided by the question: How do leaders ensure small schools have access to highly qualified educators?

Two sub-questions were formed based on the initial research question, namely:

- What attracts applicants to teaching positions in rural, small schools?
- What factors lead teachers to leave their positions in rural, small schools?

## **Purpose and Focus of Study**

With communities in rural areas shrinking in population, it has become increasingly common to have kindergarten to grade twelve schools operating with multi-grade classrooms and a small staff. As a school leader in such a school, I am interested in examining how best to ensure the students in a rural school receive the same quality of education as their peers in an urban setting. Rural schools have long been subject to high turnover rates, and several recruitment and retention strategies have been attempted in these situations (Huat See et al., 2020). As Hattie (2008) has described in his research, having excellent teachers and principals is one of the critical elements of a successful school. In this research study, I examine how principals of small schools can work to have highly effective teachers on their staff. I also examine teachers' decision-making when choosing to work and live in rural areas.

## **Personal Beliefs**

Existing research and my personal experience point to rural and remote schools being significantly disadvantaged due to several factors (Hamm et al., 2016). These factors include the distance from professional support services, increased costs of support services due to travel costs, and reduced funding from government funding models based on a per-pupil basis (Dwyer, 2018). Other disadvantageous factors include difficulty accessing professional development,

compensation, and retaining highly qualified and skilled educators who can meet the diverse needs of students spread across large distances (French, 2018). I believe investing in professional capital through building relationships will significantly affect the attraction and retention of highly effective teachers.

For this pilot study, a "small school" is defined as a school with a student population of less than 200 across grades kindergarten to grade 12. I have considered "rural" as any school located farther than 100km or one hour from a municipality with a population of 10, 000 or greater.

### **Literature Review**

Current research exploring the ideas of retention and recruitment of teachers is focuses on international education, and therein, only a handful of Canadian articles exist. There appears to be a general consensus regarding an ongoing teacher shortage "reflected in northern and rural school districts" (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010, p. 873). Emerging themes will be categorized into three broad categories based on the work of Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) book *Professional Capital*. These categories include human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Although the literature looks at these ideas in many different contexts, I will primarily focus on how these themes are applicable to developing and retaining highly qualified and effective teachers.

#### **Human Capital**

"Human capital in teaching is about having and developing the requisite knowledge and skills. It is about knowing your subject and knowing how to teach it" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 89). Educators teach various subjects in small rural schools, including courses or grades outside their formal teacher training programs. Due to a reduced staff, schools often cannot

provide the same broad curriculum as their urban counterparts. This is demonstrated in Monk's (2007) study of teacher retention in rural schools. Monk (2007) reports increasing enrollment simply caused there to be more sections of an existing course rather than more varied courses (Haller et al., 1990). Some districts have implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and local in-servicing opportunities to address gaps for teachers who are required to teach subjects unfamiliar to them (Banghart, 2021; Brenner et al., 2022; Downes & Roberts, 2018). Another strategy includes working closely with universities and colleges to prepare teachers for their profession, as well as offering scholarships for teachers to increase their qualifications. This strategy can be referred to as a "grow your own" strategy (Banghart, 2021; Monk, 2007; Downes & Roberts, 2018). Working closely with pre-service training centers can also allow new teachers to better prepare themselves for the variety and complexity of content they may be required to teach (Tran et al., 2020; Downes & Roberts, 2018).

### **Social Capital**

Social capital refers to how the quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships among people affects their ability to access knowledge and information, their senses of expectation, obligation and trust; and how far they are likely to adhere to the same norms or codes of behavior. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 90)

PLCs are the prevailing method of "giving access to other people's human capital;" however, in small schools and even small districts, access to PLCs can be hindered by time and distance (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 90). Small, rural, and isolated schools must rely on blended methods of PLC interaction, such as online meetings and virtual platforms (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Monk, 2007; McLean et al., 2014; Brenner et al., 2022). In a small rural context, there is also the additional difficulty of scheduling professional development or PLCs as



there are limited substitute teachers to provide coverage when teachers are absent. In addition, it can be problematic to have specific subject-area teachers absent for the same professional development activity as it is quite likely there are not enough staff remaining on site to teach, limiting PLC opportunities outside of regular school hours.

In the case of rural education, social capital can have an additional component whereby educators need to develop partnerships and relationships with non-teachers, such as parents and community members to meet the school's needs (Tran et al., 2020; Hamm et al., 2016). This can be in the form of partnerships in which community members share their skills and knowledge in specialized areas such as trades or agriculture.

Social capital can be the key to retaining teachers in small schools. Teachers who connect to their community's culture and are encouraged to partner with the local organizations, recreation, and economy are more likely to form a longer-term attachment to the place (Brenner et al., 2022). The social relationships formed in a rural context extend beyond professional relationships in which teachers become part of the "social fabric of the community" (Tran et al., 2020, p. 37; Brenner et al., 2022). There is potential for teachers to form romantic relationships, which can lead to marriage or other long-term commitments, encouraging teachers to develop a new sense of home within their community.

### **Decisional Capital**

"The essence of professionalism is the ability to make discretionary judgements" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 93). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) explain teachers require an appropriate number of opportunities for reflective practice to make discretionary judgements, as they are given the "opportunity to inquire into, reflect on, and adjust your practice over time" (p. 101).

Teachers who can exercise their decisional capital as a skill are given more freedom and authority to choose pedagogy, curriculum, and resources (Erb, 2007). Brenner et al. (2022) acknowledge when looking at small schools, it is essential to remember that they often contain multi-age classrooms, multi-subject classrooms, and single teachers handling various grades, subjects, or courses. This requires teachers to be able to "adapt curriculum to meet local needs, leverage local strengths," and adjust implementation guides or even reinterpret research (Brenner et al., 2022). This form of teacher-autonomy is present more often in rural schools and directly contrasts with a reduction in autonomy felt by our urban counterparts (Tran et al., 2020).

An increase in decisional capital is beneficial in a rural school but can often be difficult to implement. Time is required to increase decisional capital's capacity. Teachers need time for reflective practice and access to professional development to feel confident in their decisions. This is increasingly difficult when they do not have enough social or human capital to draw on, and it often falls on the school-based leader to manage these resources (du Plessis, 2017; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Monk, 2007; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Downes & Roberts, 2018).

The attraction of teachers to a position in a rural school can be problematic due to economic and employment cycles, government policies, as well as competition with urban centers with increased access to support and amenities (Borman, 2008; Government of Alberta, 2010; Tran et al., 2020; Downes & Roberts, 2018). When asked how schools can attract applicants to teaching positions, employers have considered interventions such as financial incentives, mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and working conditions (Huat See et al., 2020) Intervention success includes a teachers' willingness to remain

in a rural teaching position. It should be noted lack of incentives may cause teachers to leave rural areas.

### **Research Methodology**

Upon design of this research project, aspects of a grounded theory research paradigm combined with a critical praxis research approach were used to tailor my research to the context in which I work (Kress, 2011). By employing techniques from a grounded theory approach, others may have the opportunity to see their contexts within this study (Clark & Creswell, 2015). Using this approach, the data provided in my interviews can be built on to pose further questions and dig deeper into the issue at hand. Data will be analyzed using the constant comparative method, which "involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 31). The attraction and retention of school staff is a complex and varied issue, and this paradigm will allow the most freedom in terms of following where the data leads. "In critical inquiry, the study's goal in its findings or results is to critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 59). This is especially important as a school leader. I am personally interested in learning how I might influence or affect the attraction and retention of teachers.

### **Case Study Respondents**

This research study is classified as a case study, as the data collected were limited to the context of the Peace River School Division (PRSD). The data are therefore described as accurate locally within this context.

Respondents for this pilot study were chosen through convenience sampling based on my knowledge of teachers within the PRSD. There was an element of typical sampling as respondents were limited to those currently working in small, rural schools within the same

school division as myself. Each respondent was contacted via email, inviting them to participate in my pilot study. Within the invitation, I explained my goals as a researcher and the purpose of the study. Each respondent came from a different small, rural school within the PRSD.

Individual respondents had lived in a rural area for greater than ten years. All respondents had different school assignments and came from similar demographic backgrounds. All respondents were female, married, with an only child under the age of 12. Respondents all had social connections to their communities through marriage; each had remained in the same school or geographical region within the school division over five years.

Respondents were each given a pseudonym. My first interviewee, Sandra, had worked in the PRSD for nine years and at the same school for multiple years. Her position at the time of the interview involved leadership roles, but she was not in an administrative role as a school principal. Neither Sandra, nor her spouse have extended family within Alberta. Sandra was married and had one child under the age of ten. She had worked for school divisions outside of the PRSD prior to moving to Alberta and did her undergraduate teacher-preparation program in another province.

My second respondent, Leona, had been in the same community with the school division for over ten years. She had a spouse with extended family living in northern Alberta. She had one child under the age of twelve. Leona had additional extended family located on the East Coast of Canada. Leona completed her teacher preparation program outside Alberta.

The third respondent, Jackie, had worked with the PRSD in various schools and positions for approximately a decade. She had a single child under the age of twelve. Both she and her spouse had extended family in northern Alberta. Jackie's teacher education was conducted through a northern Alberta community-based program. She had worked as a substitute teacher

for school divisions other than the PRSD prior to working for the division. The spouses of each respondent work in fields outside of education, with two having significant ties to agriculture.

All three respondents own their own homes.

### **Data Collection Process**

Each respondent took part in a semi-structured interview and was recorded using videoconferencing technology. Each interview was transcribed and recorded using Google Document's built-in text-to-speech software. The identity of each respondent was protected as best as possible by using pseudonyms and redacting identifying location information. As I had a professional working relationship with each respondent, the interviews were relaxed and informal, allowing me to connect and relate to each respondent's shared experiences. The interview schedule was adjusted reactively within each interview, dependent on their responses.

### **Data Analysis**

As interviews occurred, they were then transcribed, allowing me to begin a thematic analysis coding process (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I began with a deductive approach, categorizing data based on Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) work on professional capital (Azungah, 2018). To avoid additional bias in my data, I abandoned those initial categories from Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) and re-categorized them based on the respondent's actual words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This shifted my analysis towards a more inductive approach. Word processing tools were used to highlight and colour-code each category, creating digital data lists.

The coding process place after each interview. Initially, the first interview was coded, preceded by the second, later recoding the first interview. After the third interview, I circled back and continued revising the first and second interviews. In doing this, data was compared to find patterns and insights. These insights allowed me to adjust the way in which questions were asked

in each following interview. An example of this occurred when my initial questions were almost too broad; it was as though the first respondent potentially had some thoughts about my actual research question. While I had not intended to ask it, I received even more data by changing the interview schedule to include it. It became clear to me that there was rich data to be explored by this experience behaviour question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

As the coding process took place, I was surprised to discover that my respondents had made minimal reference to professional development, professional learning communities, or teacher preparation programs. My initial research into this topic led me to believe those ideas would appear more frequently than they did. Throughout the process, I took notes and, with each interview, improved my member-checking skills. This process allowed me to prevent missed opportunities to collect data, which often led to more in-depth answers, examples, or clarifications.

Due to the fact that the respondent pool was limited to people I know, working in schools I am familiar with, part of the member-checking process involved reviewing the Alberta Teachers' Association Code of Conduct and redacting or eliminating any data, which would identify another teacher. Respondents were encouraged to omit names, and if they felt things were too identifying after reviewing their transcripts, the resulting data was removed from the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Before data collection, each respondent was provided with a copy of the interview schedule. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the data collection process with the respondent. This process included clarifying their anecdotes using paraphrasing and member-checking during the interview, transcription of the interview, colour-coding and categorization of

data, additional member-checking was completed a second time by sharing my findings with the respondents via email and allowing them the opportunity to clarify or revise their responses. The Ethics Board at the University of Alberta approved this study, and all data was handled in such a way as to be compliant with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Artifacts relating to this compliance are attached in the appendices of this document.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of this Case Study**

This case study was limited primarily by my bias toward the concepts of Professional Capitalism. In addition, I viewed all data through the lens of a school leader. None of my respondents were school principals. This difference in perspective limits my understanding of their lived reality.

Some of the data was delimited by choosing respondents of similar demographic: female, late thirties to early forties, who had lived and worked within the PRSD for more than five but less than twenty-five years. This delimitation allowed for the isolation of some of the social factors which may have influenced their answers. It also allowed me an improved comparison of their experiences by removing gender and community differences that might have existed with a more diverse respondent group.

### **Findings**

Several themes emerged through the data analysis process. These themes included colleague support, job security, the concept of home, job satisfaction, and assignment change.

The resulting themes are consistent with many international interventions for teacher recruitment and retention (Huat See et al., 2020).

### **Colleague Support**

All three respondents were particular about several behaviours their school principals engaged in, which positively affected their experiences and feelings towards working in a small, rural school. Sandra was quite impressed by her school principal, who had helped her navigate a significant shift in assignment by providing words of encouragement, teaching resources, and asking her directly what she needed. Leona was grateful for a principal who clarified family issues came before job issues. She felt her school principal's focus on a work-life balance allowed her to do a better job of both. The same principal was described as willing to listen to concerns about assignments and provided adequate preparation time when assignments changed. Jackie also had a positive experience with a principal who respected her need for flexibility when her child had health issues. Jackie had also experienced much support from colleagues when she experienced multiple shifts in assignments over her years with the division. She felt teachers were eager and willing to share ideas and resources, so she did not have to start over as a beginning teacher each time she had to teach a new course.

### **Job Security**

Two of the three respondents moved to Northern Alberta from out of province. One had lived in the Peace River area since childhood. The reason for moving was identical for the two respondents originally from out of province. In their home provinces, there was great difficulty securing teaching contracts. Each respondent described a complex substitute or supply teaching system which preceded one's ability to secure a tenured position. In contrast, when they



considered applying to the PRSD or Alberta in general, they found temporary or probationary contracts were much more accessible in contrast.

Their experiences also indicated moving from temporary and probationary contracts was a reasonably quick process, not requiring years on substitute lists. Sandra explained while she had enjoyed international teaching for a few years before settling down in the PRSD, the easiest or fastest way to secure a permanent contract was to apply in the north. Leona had also been looking for the permanency of a contract teaching job over substitute teaching. She found the process more straightforward in a rural school than in her original province.

Jackie's experience was slightly different. She had initially desired a continuous contract; however, when her initial placement was not what she had been led to believe, she decided to stay in the area and take temporary or substitute positions until her desired position became available. She felt there were enough temporary positions to satisfy her until she could obtain her desired position, and she remains confident it will at some point become available. Jackie did note when she was initially looking for a continuous contract, many offers were available to her across northwestern Canada. She also expressed she has noticed a plethora of available positions for someone willing to be flexible.

### **Sense of Home**

When discussing reasons to stay with their small schools, the theme or concept of home reoccurred. Sandra still has a sense of home in the province where she grew up but feels her current community has become her home because she is raising her family there and has established social and community connections. She feels she has developed friendships, and the school feels like a family. Leona and Sandra both were adamant the social connection available in a small school outperformed a larger center or school with a bigger population.

Leona expressed she stays in her current location because she met and married her husband in the same community as her school. Together they have a child, and she reiterated her family outside school makes her community feel like home.

Although all three respondents have stayed in the same area for more than five years and felt their current communities were home, this did not, however, prevent them from having thoughts about leaving. Jackie has stayed in the area because her husband is an established farmer. However, she will commute to nearby locations when a job presents itself. She has not experienced a school which feels like home. Likewise, Leona says her school has felt like home, but with staff changes, it feels less like a family over the years. Leona's school has seen significant staff turnover in the last five years. Colleagues she has previously connected with are no longer there, which has decreased her sense of trust and collegiality with her peers.

### **Job Satisfaction**

All three respondents expressed different ways they were able to frequently see the results of their work. As small schools have lower student populations, each described the ability to watch students grow and change over the years. This contributed to feelings of job satisfaction for all respondents. Even Jackie, who had not been with the same school for multiple concurrent years, had become familiar with many students and was able to interact with them as they aged. Jackie appreciated the diversity of courses and subjects she has had the opportunity to explore, as it has allowed her to learn new things and apply her knowledge in different classroom settings.

Sandra expressed feelings of accomplishment when she described how she was able to bridge curriculum and differentiate for students because she would have an opportunity to reteach them when they came to her class again in a different grade the following year. She appreciated having the freedom to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Sandra

also expressed frustration, finding it difficult to fit the required instruction into the given length of her class blocks. Sandra provided an example regarding a multi-grade math class where she felt there was insufficient time to adequately instruct her students given the variety of required curricula and the limited class time allocated. Leona also felt confident and capable when she could get ahead of students who may present with learning difficulties because, over the years, she has learned about family traits and developed positive relationships with her school parents.

### **Change of Assignment**

Not all aspects of teaching in a small school are beneficial, and some characteristics of small schools added stress to the respondents. Each respondent reported difficulties with parents of students on occasion. All respondents had anecdotes about stressful changes in job assignments for which they did not feel qualified or prepared. Sandra discussed how her undergraduate education had prepared her for elementary teaching, but as she remained in her small school, she had to transitioned to teaching middle-years students. This change was stressful for her as she initially felt unprepared, lacked confidence, and felt it had happened suddenly. This shift in the assignment was due to a change in the staffing population. Leona recalled a similar event in which her assignment was drastically changed (grade and subject area) mid-schoolyear. She felt unprepared and frustrated because she had minimal time to adjust her year plans and learn new content. Jackie had experienced the most shifts in teaching assignments. She spoke of a time when she was hired with the verbal promise of a specific teaching assignment. Upon arrival, she was faced with an entirely different set of subjects and grades. Jackie had also experienced a job offer for a specific school, which was changed to a different school at the last minute. Jackie further described a transition to a new position. She was provided time to meet

with the teacher who held the position prior and share resources. Jackie expressed how the transition was much less stressful than she had experienced other times.

### **Summary of Findings**

The results from this case study found teachers who had remained with the PRSD for more than five years had not left due to their connections to the community in the form of family. They had determined that Northern Alberta had become or remained “home” to them. The respondents shared that they came to the PRSD as a result of the availability of positions and stayed because they maintained a sense of accomplishment in their work, feeling supported both personally and professionally. These connections and feelings of accomplishment outweighed any difficulties encountered during their teaching assignments.

### **Conclusions, Discussion & Recommendations**

The issue of teacher attraction and retention is a varied and complex issue with a vast number of contributing factors. School leaders are expected to navigate this issue as part of their duties, ensuring students in their small schools have access to highly qualified teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore some of the factors contributing to the decision-making process of teachers who decided to join the PRSD, as well as those who may consider leaving. It is the intent of this research study to bring clarity to issues surrounding teacher retention, and better inform the practices of school leaders in decisions surrounding the staffing of their schools.

The circumstances surrounding the participant's decision to join and stay in the PRSD revolved around support from colleagues, job security, the concept of home, job satisfaction, and change of assignment. It was surprising to learn issues around teacher preparation, professional development opportunities, or teacher autonomy was not more evident in the data collected.

Therefore, based on this case study, school principals must consider the following when working on staffing their schools.

### **Be Supportive of Teachers' Home Life as well as Their Work Life**

Teachers who feel supported are more likely to remain within a school or division. Sandra and Leona both spoke about colleagues who were willing to share resources. More prevalent, however, was the idea that colleagues supported each other in personal ways. School principals who allowed and encouraged work-life balance were described positively, as were fellow teachers who went out of their way to assist with childcare or household tasks. Jackie clearly stated if she was struggling with her family life or childcare responsibilities, she would choose her child over work. She reported feeling more inclined to seek contracts and positions at schools where she knew the staff and principal to be understanding of her child's medical needs.

"Employees in the health, social service, and education industries suffer a significant risk of experiencing compassion fatigue due to the taxing nature of emotional demands and empathetic engagement" (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018, p. 27). Teachers' work life is stressful and emotional. It was clear from my study that there was a positive impact on teachers when principals looked for ways to support teachers' home and work lives. This supportive atmosphere can lead to a greater sense of wellness and positivity.

Small actions school principals engaged in found to be supportive as indicated by the respondents included being open to assisting with personal matters, not just professional, as well as taking time to provide recognition and asking the teachers what they need to succeed. These behaviours are consistent with the LQS mandated by Alberta Education for school principals (Alberta Education, 2020). Once principals build effective relationships with teachers, they can then focus on instructional leadership as well as capacity-building professional development,

ensuring teachers in each school have the skills and pedagogical knowledge to teach the broad range of curricula required in a small, rural school.

It is imperative school-based principals develop policies and practices that are respectful and attentive to the importance of teacher's home lives. Depending on the needs of individual teachers, this might require scheduling less after-school or evening events so staff do not need to arrange additional childcare. An additional recommendation would be ensuring flexibility in regard to time-off requests, allowing teachers to respond to their family's needs above all else. It is recommended school principals encourage teachers to participate in community events and activities to foster relationship building outside of the school. By doing this, teachers are more likely to be grounded and provided with a sense of home within their school and community. School divisions can support principals in these practices by providing them with the autonomy to make these decisions based on the needs of their school staff.

### **Be Open About Job Security and Advancement Opportunities**

Educators who feel valued, know their worth and may even look to enhance it. The results of this case study found school divisions should educate potential hires during the recruitment process to be knowledgeable of the job security provided by a small school environment. While anecdotal, the data suggests it is a faster process to obtain a full-time, continuous teaching contract in rural districts as opposed to urban jurisdictions. Educating recruits on the process of temporary, probationary, and continuous contracts may entice more teachers to apply to small school vacancies as they are less likely to experience a requirement of substituting or supply teaching prior to securing permanent positions.

Once teachers become established in a small school, school-based principals should support their desire to advance within the school division by engaging in succession planning as

appropriate. Sandra and Leona were both quite clear that employment opportunities initially drew them to their rural teaching positions. Sandra also expressed she was concerned she may not be inclined to stay as she desired to advance, which was not possible at her current school.

It would be appropriate for principals to be attune to teachers who desire to advance and engage in conversation with central administration regarding potential advancement opportunities within the division. By growing and developing leaders from within, it is possible for the school division to have more principals who understand the unique needs of small, rural schools. The more a teacher or a principal knows about the context in which they work, the more effective they can be as an educator, as their focus can be on professional development rather than on ensuring they understand their community. "It is also important to recognize that many times that same teacher is being hired into a division and can eventually move from one school to another" (Cranston, 2018, p. 37). By using this "grow your own" technique for succession planning, principals and districts can hire people who "already have allegiance to the district and ties to the community" (Wood et al., 2013, p. 3).

The school division and its students would benefit from improved teacher recruitment strategies. Attracting teacher applicants begins with central office staff and their public communication strategies. Teaching opportunities within the PRSD need to be made known and once employed, teachers will continue be supported divisionally and locally at their assigned school. It would be a beneficial to highlight concepts such as home and community as attractants during the recruitment process.

### **Encourage Community Involvement**

The value of a teacher in a rural setting can expand beyond the school community, and this value can be multi-directional. Small, rural schools should serve as a community hub

(Hamm et al., 2016). This is important for communities and staff alike. Teachers who develop relationships with community members are more likely "not only to stay but to thrive" (Brenner et al., 2022, p. 18). All three of the research respondents indicated their marital partners played a significant role in their desire to stay in the area. Brenner (2022) mentioned how principals might not think about social activities for their teachers, "but in rural areas, where these activities are less abundant and more difficult to find, principals and superintendents are wise to make sure their teachers feel welcome and know how to get involved" (p. 18).

All three respondents in this study were extremely clear that a significant reason for them remaining in their school or area was directly connected to their family relationships and proximity to extended family. As two of the three respondents did not move to the area with families but instead met and married their partners after securing employment with the PRSD, it is evident that the social impact of being involved in the community will undoubtedly affect a teacher's desire to remain in a rural district. It is therefore recommended schools consider planning social and community events where teachers have an opportunity to get to know people in the community and form relationships. The idea here is that teachers will find value in the connections they make within the community, and the community will express the value added to their ranks by the teacher becoming one of them.

### **Provide Recognition for a Job Well Done**

To feel valued by the community is important, but teachers should also feel empowered by their influence and contributions. Due to a significant theme surrounding the issue of job satisfaction, it would be incumbent upon a school leader to support job satisfaction by providing recognition for a job well done. Teaching in small schools is often challenging, but it was clear from all three respondents that job satisfaction came from seeing students succeed and knowing



they were making a difference. For some people, seeing the difference we make as educators is more difficult. I would conclude that if the goal is for teachers to remain in the school or division, they need to feel valued and see the impact that their work has on the community and the students. Personal gestures and words of acknowledgement or encouragement provide teachers with resilience to handle the isolating aspects of their roles. Principals should point out success stories as encouragement. District-level leadership should work with communications departments to issue public statements or congratulations via social media or district communication channels. The respondents indicated it was less about the grand gestures and more important principals took time out of their day to congratulate them during a quick conversation or staff meeting.

### **Be Considerate when Assignment Changes are Required**

Teachers desire to be respected as professionals and as people. Rural, small school leaders will not be able to escape the necessity of changes in teaching assignments over the years. Each respondent described ways this was done well and ways in which it was not. All three respondents described sudden changes with little to no preparation time as a reason why teachers are likely to leave. Teachers do not need or respond well to the added stress or anxiety of sudden assignment changes. Out of respect, principals should strive to give teachers as much notice as possible when their assignments will be changing. This will allow them time to gather materials, support from other colleagues, and mentally process the change to their assignment.

Teachers need to feel connected to other teachers. Teachers in this study expressed that they do not always feel that they have a solid and accessible network to rely on due to geographic isolation and the limitations of small school staff. It is not uncommon in a small school for a teacher to lack a grade-level partner to work with and lean on. There is great

potential for a division to lose teachers to a different employer if there was an opportunity for improved networking, professional development or support. Likewise, a teacher who feels connected to their colleagues, even if they are from a different school, is more likely to remain. If sudden change is necessary, then a well-connected principal should be able to support a teacher by pairing them with another teacher in the district or providing additional resources. It is also essential for principals to engage in pre-planning when assignment changes are coming to allow teachers opportunities to engage in networking, professional development and research. Hence, the teachers will feel supported and prepared when the changes are required.

Duignan (2020) suggests a strategy of learning "to look backward from the future" (p. 26), including becoming an expert at turning problems into opportunities, as well as being flexible enough to change with, or anticipate, a disruption. One of the most significant advantages of working for a small, rural school is staff have improved opportunities to come together and discuss their shared vision. This process is not as complicated when gathering six staff versus gathering fifty staff. Even small schools will have their share of pioneers, settlers, and resisters (Schlechty, 2016). The depth of relationships resulting from a smaller, more intimate staff can make it easier to get the resisters on board with school improvement opportunities. Collective responsibility becomes easier on a small staff because roles often overlap. This intersection of roles lends itself to the concept of "one team," or "people pulling together to serve customers," where everyone works together for the good of the students (Duignan, 2020, p. 35). None of the teachers in this study were opposed to the idea of overlapping roles, and in fact enjoyed the sense of accomplishment when they had the opportunity to learn from their colleagues. They were also able to share examples of when this worked

well, and when there were difficulties.

Aside from a focus on family and home, this study provides evidence principals and central office need to be very well organized when it comes to staffing and assigning teachers to their school roles. This organization will be key to ensuring teachers feel respected and connected. It was evident teachers desire to have ample notice for assignment changes, and they need to have adequate resources and professional development opportunities for when these changes occur. As a result, it is recommended central office have budgeting and staffing profiles completed well in advance of the next school year so any changes are accompanied by planning time, professional development, and resource procurement.

### **Leadership Quality Standard**

Principals meeting the LQS are engaging in active supervision of their teachers. The theory behind supervision is grounded in the idea that supervision is meant to be a catalyst for professional growth (Glickman, 2018). This growth should exist to ensure that students have access to high-quality education. Once a supervisor has worked with a teacher to determine an area of growth, the teacher will ideally be ready to conduct action research. Glickman (2018) states, "the supervisor's role is to determine what type of assistance teachers need (directive informational, collaborative, or nondirective), depending on the developmental levels of the teachers with respect to the focus area of the action research" (p. 370). To determine areas in need of improvement, the supervisor must be up to date on current educational research because "staff development which is aimed at improvement is typically based on prior experience and research" (Schlechty, 2016, p. 75). "Supervisors are specialists in curriculum, staff development, teaching methods, and instructional evaluation. These specialists must assume instructional leadership in order to ensure instructional quality" (Glanz, 1997, p. 15).

## **Working Together for Success**

To ease what appears to be a hugely daunting task, experienced school leaders and educators have come to understand that supervision does not have to be a one-person job (Glickman et al., 2018; DuFour, 2013). "The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning, however, is not by micromanaging instruction but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community" (DuFour, 2013, p. 37). Glickman et al. (2018), points out "shared instructional leadership frequently consists of the supervisor facilitating groups of teachers working together to improve instruction" (p. 41). This vision of shared leadership works well for those working in small schools in which the roles are many and varied. This vision of shared leadership is also consistent with the findings of this study, as teachers expressed increased job satisfaction when they had the support of their principals and colleagues.

## **Next Steps**

For school leaders to have a more in-depth look at the issue of teacher attrition and retention, further research utilizing a much broader selection of respondents is required. Further research would reveal other essential factors teachers consider when choosing to stay or leave a small, rural school. In addition, research using a mixed-methods approach would be effective if a school leader desired to know more about utilizing their staff effectively. This would allow for the qualitative analysis to demonstrate teacher and leadership decision processes in comparison to student achievement results. Ideally, this comparison would indicate how a school leader might ensure access to highly effective teachers. Due to limitations, this study was unable to evaluate the quality of the research respondents. Assuming a school leader has additional methods for evaluating the quality of educators in their schools, this case study provides

recommended suggestions for attracting and retaining the same. The research from this case study could potentially have cross-over implications for other medical or social services fields.

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## Appendix A

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

Jennifer Daniel

Graduate Student

Educational Policy Studies

Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3 780.649.4052

danielj@prsd.ab.ca

February 5, 2022

PARTICIPANT NAME

PARTICIPANT ADDRESS

Dear [Participant]:

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 is to you to take part in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to explore how small schools can ensure they have access to highly qualified teachers. Your participation would involve a one-hour interview over Google meet to discuss your decision-making process for choosing your current position and reasons you stay. The interview questions will be emailed to you at least 24 hours prior to our interview time to allow you an opportunity to view them ahead of time. 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 collecting interview data and then coding it deductively and inductively for emergent themes. The interview will be

video 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 March 31, 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).

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 my principal office desk 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 by email by February 10, 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,

Jennifer Daniel

Graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies

Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

780.649.4052

[danielj@prsd.ab.ca](mailto:danielj@prsd.ab.ca)

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**Educational Policy Studies**

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## Appendix B

### Adult Participant Consent Form

**EDPS 509 Research Assignment:** How do school leaders ensure small K-12 schools have access to highly qualified teachers?

**Researcher:** Jennifer Daniel

**Date Range of Research:** February 1, 2022- March 21, 2022

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, How do school leaders ensure small K-12 schools have access to highly qualified teachers?

I understand that my participation includes:

- a one-hour recorded interview via Google Meet with Jennifer Daniel

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 March 31, 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.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

**University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710**

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## Appendix C

### Interview Schedule

#### Research Question:

How do leaders ensure that small k-12 schools have access to highly qualified educators?

#### Interview Questions:

- 1) What were some factors or considerations involved in your decision to accept your current position?
  - a) Tell me about your decision-making process leading up to your current position?
- 2) What are some factors or considerations involved in your decision to remain in your current position?
- 3) If you have ever thought about leaving your current position, what are some factors that prompt those thoughts?
- 4) Can you describe an ideal working environment where you feel sufficiently prepared to deliver the content and complete the duties assigned to you by your supervisor?
- 5) What role does your supervisor play, in ensuring you can perform at your best?
- 6) What do you see as advantages for students attending schools with smaller populations such as a k-12 school that has a population of less than 200 students?
- 7) How do you think leaders should ensure that small k-12 schools have access to highly qualified educators?