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Teacher Incentives in Rural Schools

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This study was undertaken to determine the number and types of incentives being offered to teachers in rural schools and to ascertain if the offering of incentives had an effect on the recruitment and retention of teachers. Sixty-seven superintendents of rural schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia responded to a questionnaire. The results of the study indicate that the majority of rural school districts use fringe benefits as the primary incentive for recruiting new teachers. Also, these districts offer tuition for courses, money for instructional materials and attending conferences, and released time for special activities as the major incentives for retaining teachers. However, most school districts offer no rewards to superior teachers. Furthermore, the study indicated that when school districts offer more incentives and rewards, fewer teachers are hired. Based on the results of the research, it is recommended that school districts offer more incentives and rewards in order to recruit and retain competent and experienced teachers for rural schools.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the relationships between three current, important issues in American education: the improvement of education in rural schools, the recruitment and retention of capable teachers, and the use of rewards and other incentives.

The use of rewards and incentives for teachers seems to be especially crucial to the improvement of rural education. Numerous studies have shown that no matter what standardized testing systems or assessment programs are used, rural school children consistently score lower than children in metropolitan areas. In theory, effective teaching in rural schools requires the best talent available. In practice, however, rural teachers' most common attribute has often been availability, rather than proven talent. Studies have consistently shown that many rural teachers lack adequate instructional skills for developing academic excellence in rural children.

There needs to be a concerted effort by educators to encourage the best available teachers to accept positions in rural schools and then make it attractive for them to remain there long enough to make a difference. However, we are currently having serious problems in attracting capable young people to the teaching profession. The problems are magnified when we attempt to attract them to the profession of teaching in rural schools.

Wimpelberg and King [13] discussed the relationships of teacher incentives to teacher recruitment. They contend there will continue to be a decline in the number of able teachers who enter the profession in the coming decade because young people have opportunities to consider higher paying careers outside of teaching. This presents a problem in attracting competent students to a career in school teaching.

The authors suggested that one of the problems with choosing teaching as a career is that it is "unstaged." The only way to move *up* from the position of classroom teacher is to move *out* of the classroom altogether, into a supervisory or administrative position. Teaching as a career, generally, offers no incentives in the form of increased responsibility and status for those who wish to remain in the classroom.

A second problem is that teachers' salaries, generally, are low and have accelerated at rates lower than salaries for persons with bachelor's degrees who have chosen other careers after college. One report [1] shows that starting salaries for recent graduates with bachelor's degrees in chemistry, mathematics, computers, or engineering were offered starting salaries of well over $20,000. Liberal arts graduates who chose to work in private industry were offered beginning salaries of $18,564. This compares to $14,026 for Virginia teachers with bachelor's degrees.

Wimpelberg and King [13] propose that in addition to the problems of status and salary, a third problem of teachers is the school environment in which they work. Teachers need a sense of community within the school where students, teachers, and administrators form a partnership. This might have the greatest potential for sustaining the commitment of competent teachers because it integrates their involvement into the social system of the school. The authors conclude that capable students would be attracted to teaching as a career if we increase social, monetary, and "psychic" incentives.

According to Sher [11], encouraging the best available teachers to come to schools in sparsely populated areas and then making it attractive for them to remain there long enough to make a lasting, positive contribution is a long-standing problem in rural education. The available evidence suggests that attracting and keeping competent

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people to teach the "three R's" in rural schools is largely a function of the "three C's"—characteristics, conditions, and compensation.

Sher [11] says that the characteristics of those in preservice programs determines who will be attracted to teaching in rural schools. Rural people who are interested in becoming teachers in rural schools should be recruited for preservice programs. Such people become more effective rural teachers than urban-reared students because they already understand the social and cultural mores of the rural community.

In reference to the second "C," conditions, some school districts are appealing, while others are not. Districts with scenic surroundings, a pleasant climate, good facilities, and easy access to shopping areas and recreational facilities have few problems attracting competent teachers. Conversely, those districts that do not have these attractions find it difficult to recruit teachers. However, the more isolated school communities can help alleviate the problem by providing suitable school buildings and working conditions. They can also help to alleviate the psychological effects of isolation by providing teachers with the time and the means to make trips to more populated areas.

The third "C," compensation, is probably the most crucial consideration in attracting competent teachers to rural communities. Rural teachers in the United States earn an average of 40 per cent less than their urban counterparts. In Virginia, teachers with ten years of experience in Alexandria, an urban area, earn $29,645 while ten-year teachers in Cape Charles County, a rural area, earn $12,858 [1]. Rather than trying to provide comparable salaries, many rural school districts offer other kinds of incentives to recruit and retain teachers. These incentives include salary supplements, travel allowances, moving expenses, housing allowances, accelerated advancement opportunities, favorable pupil-teaching ratios, and inservice education. We can conclude from Sher's [11] remarks that if rural districts attempt to improve "the three C's," more capable teachers can be recruited for rural schools.

Many educators think that the third "C," compensation, is the ultimate solution to the problems of recruitment and retention. Schrag [10] believes that rewarding excellence in teaching provides an incentive for good teachers to continue, and for good prospects to enter, the profession. He says, "Any occupation in which merit is totally divorced from rewards will fail to attract or retain its fair share of creative, dedicated individuals." He proposes that schools should select the top ten to fifteen per cent of teachers and reward them with higher status and merit pay.

Jerome Cramer [4], in his article on merit pay systems, contends that such systems for teachers must be considered because "they can encourage the best teachers to stay right where they are needed most—in the classroom." He goes on to describe successful merit pay plans that have been in effect for several years in Dalton, Georgia; Ladue, Missouri; Lake Forest, Illinois; and Round Valley, California. The article reports that these plans have been very effective in encouraging capable teachers to remain in the school system.

Highly competent educators come from the ranks of the motivated, and that is where public education is failing [3]. A lack of consistent motives for teachers to strive for excellence, and the "step increase" method often used to reward teachers drives "hard-working, ambitious teachers from the profession." Casey, like Cramer, strongly advocates the use of merit pay plans and offers suggestions for their implementation. He believes that without merit pay, public schools will be "condemned to mediocrity or worse."

English [5] expresses agreement that there needs to be differentiated pay for teachers when he states that one of the most critical problems now facing the teaching profession is "the lack of career incentives sufficient to retain the most talented teachers." However, he disagrees with the notion of "merit pay as performance pay." Instead, he proposes a "market-sensitive pay" plan which is based on the idea of supply and demand. He believes that such a plan will attract needed teachers to a school system and will encourage them to remain there.

Perhaps the most famous advocate of compensation for teachers is the National Commission on Excellence in Education [8]. The Commission stated in its report that there should be incentives to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession and a system to recognize and financially reward superior teachers. The President of the United States and most of the public has interpreted the report to mean teachers must be awarded merit pay [7; 9].

As a result of the Commission's report and the enormous amount of attention it has received, five states have initiated statewide teacher salary incentive plans. The states are: Florida, Utah, California, Illinois and Tennessee [12]. These plans are an attempt to stem "the rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools by attracting talented new teachers and retaining effective experienced ones.

Because it is vitally important that rural school children have the best teachers available, attempts must be made to attract and retain capable teachers. If the current plans and proposals for teacher incentives live up to their promises, we can assume that the use of teacher rewards, incentives, and merit pay will be a viable solution for rural schools.

Wimpelberg and King [13] denote that teachers need increased status, salary, and "psychic" incentives if they are to be attracted to and remain in the teaching profession. According to Sher [11], it is the characteristics of potential teachers, the conditions under which they work, and the compensation they receive that attracts and keeps competent teachers in schools. Other writers suggest that adequate financial compensation will solve the problem. It appears that the solution to the problem is a combination of all of these factors.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the incentives (status, "psychic" conditions, and compensation) being offered in rural schools in Virginia. For this study, the term "rural" is being defined as a non-urban and non-suburban area where the principal occupation of the peo-

ple is farming or fishing. The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To ascertain the extent rural school districts have teacher incentive programs.
2. To determine the kinds of incentives being offered.
3. To study the effects incentives have on the attrition rate of teachers.
4. To draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the findings and the literature.

METHOD

Sample

Ninety-five questionnaires were mailed to the superintendents of rural schools in Virginia, and sixty-seven superintendents responded. The geographic location of the school districts were classified as Tidewater, Central, Northern, Valley, and Southwest Virginia. These school districts extend from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean and from near Washington, D.C. to the North Carolina border. Eleven school districts were located in the Tidewater area; twenty-four school districts were located in Central Virginia; nine school districts were located in Northern Virginia; seven school districts were located in the Valley; and seventeen school districts were located in the Southwest area. The sizes of the school districts were: eleven districts with 1-3 schools; twenty-two districts with 4-7 schools; nine districts with 8-11 schools; eleven districts with 11-15 schools; and fifteen districts with over 15 schools. Some counties have several schools, both suburban and rural. The suburban schools are located near cities, while the rural schools are more isolated. The questionnaire specifically asked for information about rural schools. It was reported that regardless of the location of the school, the same general practices for teacher incentives and rewards apply to all schools within the district.

Instrument

A three-part questionnaire was developed to solicit information about teacher incentive programs. Part I asked for demographic information on the size and location of each school district. Part II presented five basic questions with several optional responses for each. The questions were as follows: (1) Do you offer incentives to recruit new teachers? (2) Do you offer incentives to retain faculty? (3) Do you offer rewards to superior teachers? (4) How many teachers have you hired during the past two years? (5) How many teachers have left your system during the past two years? Part III of the instrument requested any additional information that the administrators cared to provide about their programs.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires was analyzed using the "Statistical Analysis System." This system furnished frequency distributions on the total number of incentives.

TABLE 1

Incentives and Rewards Offered in Rural Schools

	Yes	No
INCENTIVES FOR RECRUITMENT		
Fringe benefits	96%	4%
Competitive starting salaries	63%	37%
Assistance with finding housing	47%	53%
Moving expenses	3%	97%
INCENTIVES FOR RETENTION		
Tuition for courses	85%	15%
Money for instructional materials	79%	21%
Release time for special activities	78%	22%
Money for attending conferences	76%	24%
Low teacher-pupil ratio	75%	25%
Teacher aides	69%	31%
Travel allowances	53%	47%
Planning period for all grade levels	37%	63%
Sabbatical leave	31%	69%
Mentor relationship	25%	75%
School-sponsored/endorsed social activities	22%	78%
REWARDS FOR SUPERIOR TEACHERS		
"Teacher Appreciation Day" Program	25%	75%
Certificates or plaques	16%	84%
"Teacher of the Year" awards	13%	87%
"Master Teacher" plan	4%	96%
Merit pay	2%	98%

Cross tabulations were computed on (1) the size of the school district and the types of incentives; (2) the size of the school district and the number of teachers who were hired and the number who left; and (3) the types and percentages of incentives offered and the number of teachers hired and the number who left.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table 1 presents the results of the responses to questions about the kinds of incentives offered for the recruitment and retention of teachers and the kinds of rewards offered to superior teachers. It shows that most school systems use fringe benefits as the primary incentive for teacher recruitment. These benefits include health and dental insurance, employer-paid life insurance and retirement fees, and varied types of leave plans. More than half of the respondents indicated that they offer new faculty competitive salaries. One superintendent candidly admitted that while salaries in his school district were competitive with other rural districts of its size, they were not competitive with suburban and urban systems.

A cross tabulation between the size of the school district and the type of incentive offered revealed no significant differences. However, a larger percentage (73 per cent) of small school districts, those with one to three schools, offer assistance with finding housing than do larger districts (33 per cent), those with 15 or more schools.

Table 1 also shows that most school districts provide

tuition for courses as the major incentive to retain teachers in the schools. One superintendent reported that his district provides a free, "professional development program" which offers credit or non-credit courses and workshops for teachers. More than half of the respondents indicated that in order to retain faculty, they also offer money for instructional materials, released time for special activities, money for attending conferences, a low teacher-pupil ratio, the assistance of teacher aides, and travel allowances. One district offers monetary supplements for sponsoring extra-curricular activities.

A cross tabulation for the size of the school districts with incentives for teacher retention indicates no significant overall differences between school sizes and most of the incentives. However, there were significant differences found between school size and money for instructional materials, and school size and sabbatical leave. All small school districts (1-3) offered money for instructional materials as compared with 53 per cent of school districts with more than 15 schools. In addition, the larger school district offered a much higher percentage of sabbatical leaves than did the small districts.

Finally, Table 1 shows that most school districts do not offer rewards to superior teachers. Only one-fourth offer "Teacher Appreciation Day" programs, while a scant 2 per cent offer merit pay. Nevertheless, two superintendents submitted detailed information about their district's reward programs. A cross tabulation for the size of the school districts with rewards for superior teachers showed no significant statistical differences. However, the districts with more than 15 schools gave larger percentages of "Teacher Appreciation" programs, "Teacher of the Year" awards, and certificates or plaques than did districts with fewer schools.

Incentives play an important role in the attrition rate of teachers. Of all teachers hired in the 67 districts, 77.6 per cent were hired in districts offering high incentives for recruitment. Conversely, districts offering low incentives for recruitment hired only 22.4 per cent. Both the retention and recruitment are directly related to the range of incentives offered. Among those districts reporting attrition, 71.6 per cent of the attrition occurred in districts offering low retention incentives, whereas only 28.4 per cent of the attrition occurred in districts offering high incentives. In addition, the research focused on the impact of rewards for superior teachers on attrition in rural school districts. The results indicated that districts offering more rewards had a much lower attrition rate than those offering fewer rewards.

Similarly, school districts offering few rewards experienced 92.5 per cent of the reported attrition, whereas school districts offering high rewards absorbed only 7.5 per cent of the attrition.

DISCUSSION

While the great majority of the rural school districts participating in the study offer some incentives for recruitment and retention, very few offer rewards for superior teachers. The study indicated that when school districts offer more incentives and rewards, the attrition rate is lower. Reducing the attrition of teachers in rural schools would ultimately improve the quality of education being offered to children. Therefore, much more consideration needs to be given to the means of attracting and keeping capable teachers. School administrators need to be mindful of Wimpelberg and King's [13] "social, monetary, and psychic" incentives and Sher's [11] "characteristics, conditions, and compensation" incentives. Based on this study and the literature, the following recommendations are made:

1. All rural school districts should assist new teachers in finding suitable housing. This seems to be a critical problem for many new teachers. They often have to drive substantial distances because rural areas do not have adequate housing for rent. One respondent to the study admitted that his county has very limited, affordable housing for teachers. However, two other respondents said that their counties own property which they offer for rent to new teachers. Other rural counties should consider such a plan.

2. Rural school districts should consider reimbursement of moving expenses to attract those teachers who are in high demand, such as for mathematics and science. Sher [11] suggests that finding employment for the spouses of such teachers would be a very attractive incentive. English's [5] "market-sensitive pay" should also be taken into consideration.

3. Most school districts offer such incentives for retaining teachers as tuition for courses, money for instructional materials and conferences, and released time for special activities. However, *all* districts need to offer these incentives, as well as additional ones, such as teacher aides, planning periods, low teacher-pupil ratio, and sabbatical leave. These kinds of benefits help teachers to increase their effectiveness by providing them with adequate time and resources for personal and professional development.

4. In rural communities with limited recreational facilities, new teachers often complain about the loneliness and isolation they feel. With few social activities, new teachers can develop psychological symptoms of boredom and depression. They frequently cite social isolation as the reason they resign after a year or two. Rural schools need to sponsor or endorse social activities for teachers. Such activities could include softball teams, bowling leagues, bridge clubs, sewing circles, "Trivial Pursuit" contests, aerobic exercises, shopping expeditions, etc. Sher [11] says that the fact that a school is located 100 or more miles from the nearest large town cannot be altered. However, school officials can provide teachers with the time and resources to visit the urban areas often enough "to alleviate the psychological effects of isolation."

5. Rural school districts must consider offering rewards to superior teachers in order to retain them. Teachers will often continue to work under adverse conditions if they feel their efforts are acknowledged and appreciated. "Teacher Appreciation Day" programs generally set aside

a day each year to honor teachers for their services by giving them a luncheon or an assembly program. Other inexpensive ways of honoring teachers are "Teacher of the Year" awards, certificates, plaques, and letters of commendation. All of these activities can be co-sponsored with parent and community groups.

6. Rural school districts should also consider offering a differentiated pay plan for superior teachers. Two respondents to the study submitted detailed information about their districts' plans. One program offers six categories, and teachers may move "up the ladder" from one category to another with increases in salary for each step. The other program is a merit pay plan which offers a flat $2,000 yearly salary differential for teachers who meet certain specific criteria. Both plans have as their general goal "to attract and retain excellent teachers by rewarding excellence in teaching."

Competent, capable and dedicated teachers are needed in order to improve education in rural schools. In order to recruit and retain such people, rural school districts need to consider using incentives and rewards. It is hoped that this study will increase awareness of the kinds of incentives and rewards that are offered by school districts and encourage all rural districts to develop such plans.

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