

While many states and counties are seeing a decline in the present and future school-age population, the situation is severe in the already sparsely populated rural counties of the Great Plains states. As a result, very small schools and districts are getting even smaller, and scarce resources are continuing to shrink. How do we ensure that students in rural schools receive a quality education from highly qualified teachers as enrollment continues to drop?

Declining ENROLLMENTS

Impact Teaching in the Great Plains States

By Terri Duggan Schwartzbeck and Mary Kusler



Superintendents and principals in all school districts work hard to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. But it's a struggle in the Great Plains states of Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming, where families continue to leave.



The Challenges Facing Rural Schools

The need to recruit and retain teachers in rural schools will only increase in urgency as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 raises the bar for qualified teachers. While the revolving door of teaching affects school systems of all sizes, it is acute in rural districts. Between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers in rural districts leave the profession after just five years. Across the teaching force, the turnover rate is 15.7 percent each year, compared to 11.9 percent in other professions.¹



Challenges Facing Rural School Districts in Attracting and Retaining Teachers

- Declining enrollment
- Low pay
- Fewer teachers meet the highly qualified standard
- Teachers burdened with multiple subjects
- Lower salaries
- Geographic isolation

Teachers leave rural districts mainly because of low pay. Their salaries can be up to 13 percent lower than in non-rural districts² and while turnover is not higher in rural districts overall, it is higher in small districts (16.4 percent) and high-poverty districts (20 percent).³ Teachers in rural districts also leave because they feel isolated.⁴

No Child Left Behind takes the challenge up a notch. In order to meet the new definition of highly qualified, the law requires that, by the end of the 2005-06 school year, all teachers must:

- Be fully certified by the state in which they are teaching, and
- Hold at least a bachelor's degree, or
- Demonstrate subject-matter competence. For middle and high school teachers, this can mean either passing a subject-area test or having a major in the field they teach.

These requirements are certain to increase the competition for teachers that meet the highly qualified standard. This leaves rural districts at a disadvantage since they are less likely to be able to keep up in terms of salary.⁵ In small rural districts, teachers often teach more than one subject, which adds to the challenge.

Recent adjustments to the law provide some relief. Rural teachers now have an extra year to become highly qualified and states are encouraged to develop more streamlined standards for multiple-subject teachers. While this is a step in the right direction, small rural schools with only two teachers will still find it difficult to meet these regulations.

Because there is little research on the issue of teacher quality, recruitment, and retention in rural districts, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the Appalachian Education Laboratory (AEL)⁶ surveyed rural school superintendents and found that:

- While many superintendents reported that all or most of their teachers were highly qualified, there was still confusion about the definition of highly qualified.
- Far more middle and high school teachers (nine percent) did not meet the federal standard than elementary teachers (three percent).

These findings were echoed in a study conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP),⁷ which found that in rural districts 10 percent of high school teachers, 11 percent of middle and junior high school teachers, and four percent of elementary teachers were not highly qualified. And in districts considered "small" (200-3,503 students), the percentages were higher, with 17 percent of high school teachers, 16 percent of middle/junior high and seven percent of elementary teachers not highly qualified.

- The majority of teachers in small rural districts are burdened with teaching multiple-subjects. Superintendents in districts with fewer than 250 students reported that as many as 57 percent of secondary-level teachers were teaching multiple subjects. For rural districts with between 250 and 2,500 students, the number ranged from 25 percent to 41 percent.

Bob Johnson, superintendent in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, wrote:

“The one issue that will not be solved is the [requirement] to have...staff member[s] fully certified in everything they teach. For many of our teachers, who teach several different [subjects], this would require many additional years of schooling, and is just not an option. They are wonderful teachers, who know their subjects extremely well, but just cannot be expected to jump through hoops for everything they teach, and still be expected to remain a rural teacher.”

- The difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers also varied by the size of the district. Across all districts, 19 percent of superintendents reported that it was “very” or “extremely” difficult to attract teachers, and 10 percent indicated it was “very” or “extremely” difficult to retain those teachers. In contrast, in those very small districts with fewer than 250 students, 41 percent reported that it was “very” or “extremely” difficult to attract teachers and 17 percent reported the same levels of difficulty in retaining teachers.

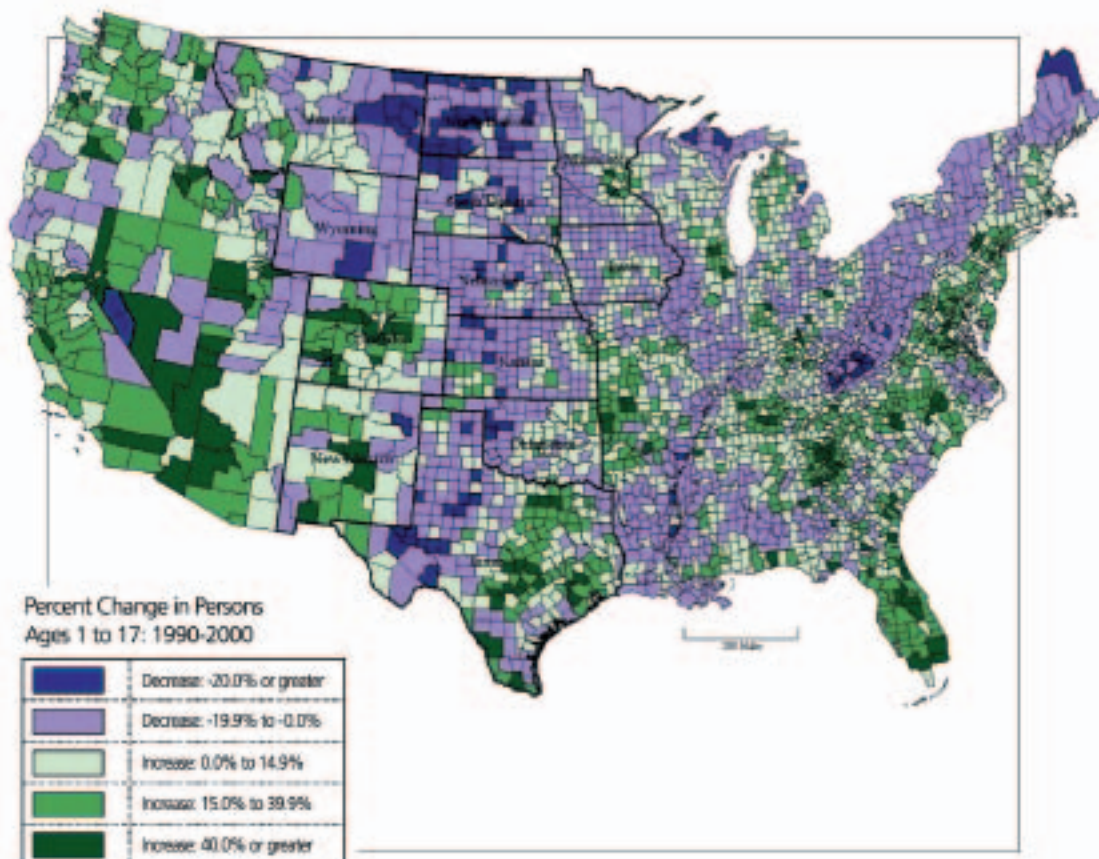


Mary Kusler, senior legislative specialist, American Association of School Administrators

Addressing Declining Enrollment in Great Plains Frontier Counties

Figure 1. Percent Change in Population Ages 1 to 17 by County, 1990-2000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Decennial Census Map from North Dakota State Data Center



“The challenge in these rural areas is: How do we ensure these students receive a quality education from highly qualified teachers?”

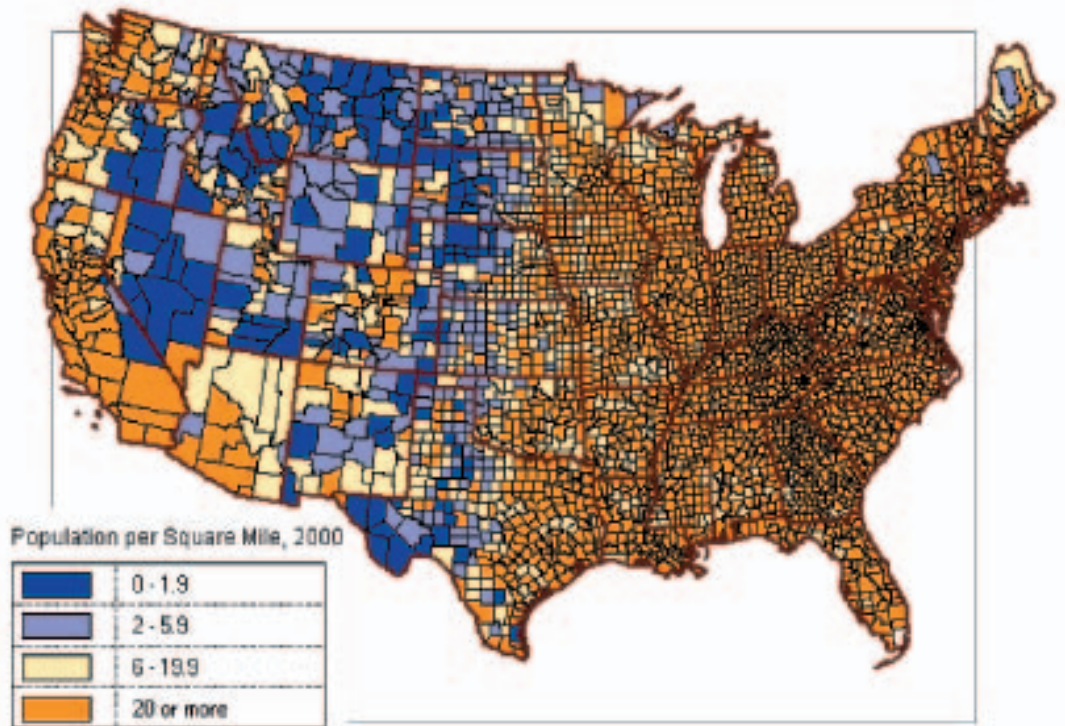
Maintaining Quality in Small and Rural Districts

With this data, AASA members and staff gathered at Wingspread in October 2003 to discuss how small and rural schools can continue to provide the highest quality education possible, with dwindling students and resources and increased pressure from NCLB.

The latest U.S. Census reveals serious declines in the present and future school-age populations in rural counties in the Great Plains, as well as in the Mississippi Delta and parts of the Appalachian region. Figure 2 highlights “frontier” counties with fewer than six people per square mile. In these districts, school populations are miniscule, and further declines can have a serious effect.

Figure 2. Population per Square Mile, By County, 2000

Source: Data for year 2000 from U.S. Census Bureau. Proximity, Alexandria, VA.



The participants in the Wingspread conference developed a vision for a “smart” decline that would accept the lack of growth while still providing critical services such as education. The group quickly identified high quality teachers as essential to continuing to provide a quality education, as well as meet the higher standards of No Child Left Behind.

It also became clear that the “same old” would not suffice any longer for small districts needing to recruit good teachers. Rural districts must reach out in new ways, with strategies including:

- Emphasizing mentoring or induction programs, and the personal attention new teachers will receive as well as small class sizes.
- Offering the best benefits possible, and educating newly graduated teachers about the importance of good retirement packages.
- Working more closely with nearby colleges and universities to increase awareness of the requirements and benefits of teaching in the district.
- Highlighting the positive aspects of the district, such as low cost of living and safety.
- Providing a personal network to make teachers feel welcome in the community.

The information and ideas provided by the Wingspread conference can serve as a starting point for superintendents and educators in Great Plains communities as they face the facts of declining enrollment and think creatively about how to attract and retain the best teachers.

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