Will they stay, or will they go? Teacher perceptions of working conditions in rural Alaska

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Introduction

Teacher turnover in rural Alaska schools has been a significant problem for decades. Why do we care? National research indicates a strong correlation between high turnover and poor student outcomes (Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff, 2012), and we see this in Alaska. Out of the 25 rural districts with high teacher turnover rates, ten graduated fewer than 60% of their students between 2008 and 2012, and 5 graduated fewer than half their students.

Methods & Respondents

In April and May 2013 we sent an online survey to all teachers for whom we had emails in Alaska’s “rural” districts (all districts other than Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough), excluding Galena because of major spring floods. We asked closed- and open-ended questions on topics ranging from satisfaction with parent and community support, school and district leadership, housing, salary and health benefits to teacher participation in decision making and their views on why some students don’t graduate high school prepared for success. We also asked teachers whether they planned to be in their current school the next year. In December of 2013 we matched survey responses against teacher assignments in fall 2013 to determine who actually stayed and who left. 290 teachers in 17 districts completed the survey (a response rate of about 28%). Respondents were predominantly white and female, reflecting Alaska’s teacher demographics. Over 75% had grown up and learned to teach outside Alaska. Our respondents are not a representative sample, and we do not know whether their responses are skewed in any way.

How do Teacher Turnover rates differ in rural Alaska school districts?

Previous work looked at the rate of teacher turnover in Alaska and the reasons exiting teachers left Alaska but none systematically looked at how all teachers perceive their working conditions, regardless of whether they are stayers or leavers, and whether those perceptions differ between teachers who stay and those who choose to leave. In Spring 2013 we surveyed rural teachers on their perceptions of their working conditions, and the factors contributing to their decision to leave their school or stay.

How do teachers feel about their jobs?

The survey asked about overall job satisfaction. The majority of respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied, and only 16% reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. We also asked about a number of factors that might affect overall teaching satisfaction, such as school facilities and workload, benefits, leadership, student behavior, community life and relationships with parents.

The greatest difference was their perception of whether the school is supportive of the school, with less disagreement in areas not shown, such as salary, benefits, workload and access to health care.

Implications

Some areas of dissatisfaction cannot easily be changed for rural teachers. Things like access to health care, shopping, and transportation are challenges associated with rural living that all rural residents face, and beyond school district control.

However, some areas of teacher dissatisfaction, especially strong for those teachers who left, could be changed. School and district leadership can be strengthened, and parent and community relationships improved. Those improvements could lead to better student conduct.

Addressing those areas of dissatisfaction could lead to better retention rates and, hopefully, more effective teaching and greater student success. The cliché that “it takes a village” also holds true for schools— if teachers feel unsupported or disconnected from communities, they will not stay.

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