

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

## 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.

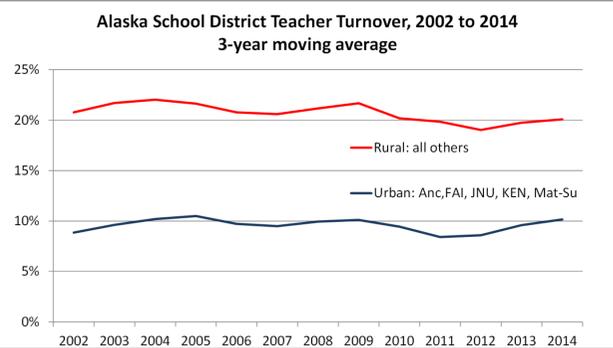


## Teacher turnover is linked to poor student achievement

	Average Teacher Turnover	Average Percent of students scoring proficient in Reading
Five Lowest Turnover Districts	8.7%	85.8%
Five Highest Turnover Districts	37.9%	46.9%

There have been many efforts to increase teacher retention in rural Alaska, such as signing bonuses, financial incentives for teachers who stay for a certain period of time, construction of new teacher housing, and financial support for earning teaching and administrative degrees. Yet turnover remains high. There is a lack of systematic information on why teachers leave rural schools or stay.

## Teacher Turnover rates are high 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 perceive their students' college and career readiness?

Many teachers do not believe their students will leave school prepared for college or the workforce. The chart to the right shows respondents' estimates of how many of their students will leave school college or career ready. Almost two-thirds felt that fewer than half their students would reach that goal. In open-ended responses, many teachers attributed this to lack of student motivation and parent and community support; however, some also expressed the belief that schools were not providing adequate academic challenges.

## Contact

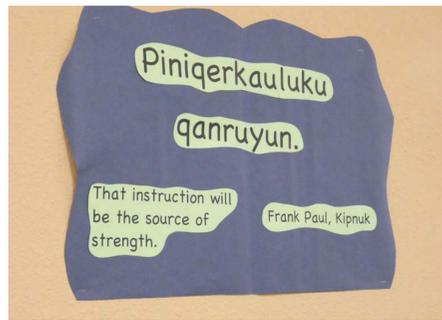
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## Methods & Respondents

In April and May 2013 we sent an on-line 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 29%). 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 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.

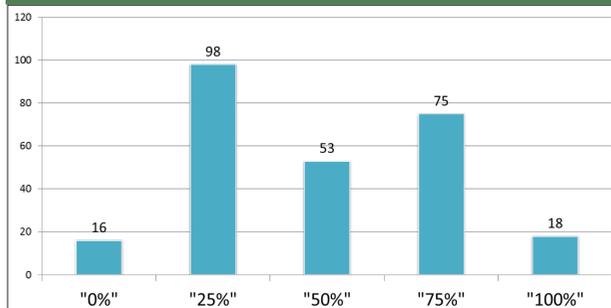
We also asked about a number of factors that might affect overall teaching satisfaction, such as school facilities and workload, benefits, leadership, student behavior, community life and relationships with parents.

The biggest areas of workplace dissatisfaction were parent and community support, student conduct, and district leadership. Most respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with salary and benefits.

The greatest areas of dissatisfaction with rural life were access to health care and shopping, with over 45% and 40% of teacher expressing dissatisfaction with these, respectively.

We asked about the extent to which teachers feel integrated into and enjoy living in their community. While over 50% felt very integrated, 20% felt little or not at all integrated. Asked in a different way, teachers expressed mostly positive views about the communities where they teach, but 31% did feel lonely, isolated or disconnected at times.

## Choose the option that most closely matches the percentage of students in your classes you expect will leave high school college or career ready

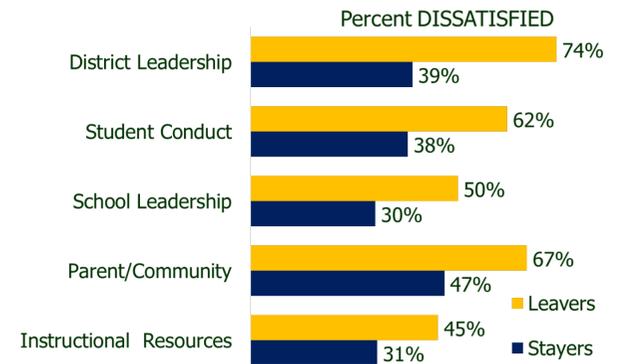


## How do Stayers differ from Leavers?

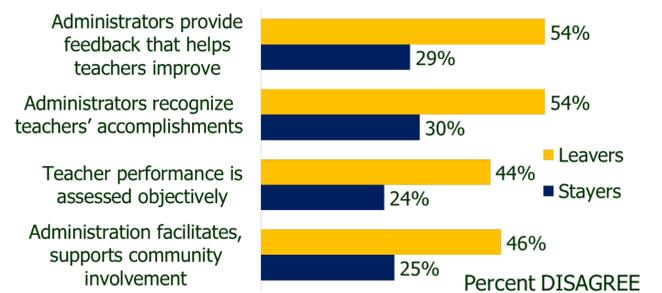
The charts below show areas where teachers who stayed answered differently from those who left. Unsurprisingly, teachers who left were more likely to be dissatisfied with a broad range of issues.

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

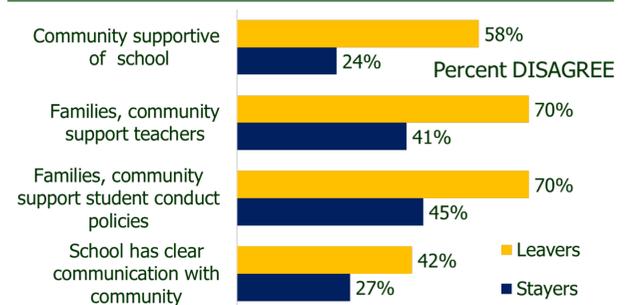
## How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of these aspects of your current job?



## Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following about your school



## Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements



## 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.



## Acknowledgement

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