Reducing Turnover: Difficult but Crucial

Attempts to reduce the shortages we identified in certain specializations and in certain districts will be complicated by Alaska's heavy dependence on teachers from outside the state. Alaska recruits about 70 percent of its teachers from outside Alaska—which means it competes with other states, especially western states, for teachers with specializations that are in short supply.

National data show that the overall supply of teachers is more than adequate, but that shortages exist in certain specialties—particularly special education and secondary math and science. For example, when the Washington Education Association recently surveyed special education teachers in Washington state, it found that at least one in three special education teachers planned to leave the field within the next five years.1

Accomplished teachers with specialties that are in short supply can usually decide for themselves where they will teach. Alaska's school districts are not in a strong competitive position to attract such teachers. Alaska teachers' salaries are comparatively modest, when you consider the state's higher living costs—especially in rural communities, where living costs are higher than in urban Alaska and much higher than in most of the U.S.

And attracting teachers to Alaska's schools is only one step: the second step is keeping them once we hire them. National data, as well as our own survey data, show that working conditions—everything from class size to school security to professional development opportunities—play a major part in teachers' decisions to stay or go. Personal and family reasons, apart from working conditions or salary, also strongly influence whether teachers stay in their jobs. Not all the factors that affect teacher retention can be influenced by policy changes—but some clearly could.

The implications of high turnover in some rural Alaska districts also go far beyond the costs, administrative difficulties, and lack of continuity districts face when they have to replace so many teachers every year. Recent research shows a strong relationship between low teacher turnover and higher-than-average student achievement.2 Results from Alaska's High School Graduation Qualifying Examination confirm that many of the remote rural districts where Alaska does not have a general shortage of teachers, despite what many Alaskans believe. But the state's 53 school districts do face shortages of special education teachers and to a lesser extent secondary math and science teachers. Shortages in these specializations are not confined to Alaska but are national.

And about a third of Alaska's school districts—almost entirely remote rural districts—face chronic teacher shortages. These remote districts have historically been hard to staff, and some scramble to fill as many as half their teaching jobs every year.

These are among the findings of the Institute of Social and Economic Research's assessment of the supply of and demand for teachers in Alaska (see page 12). The president of the University of Alaska and the commissioner of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development asked ISER to examine whether Alaska has a shortage of teachers and, if so, to provide information that could help policymakers deal with the problem.

We collected and analyzed data from many sources, including the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, the University of Alaska, and the Alaska Teacher Placement office at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. We also collected new data through interviews and surveys, including a survey of teachers who left their jobs at the end of the 2000-2001 school year and a survey of instructional aides working in urban and rural schools during the 2001-2002 school year.

In this executive summary we first briefly discuss why recruiting and retaining quality teachers for all Alaska schools will be difficult but is crucial. Then we summarize our findings about (1) the variation in teacher turnover across Alaska's school districts; (2) why Alaska teachers leave their jobs; (3) job satisfaction among teachers who leave their jobs; (4) how many teachers graduate in Alaska; and (5) the potential for Alaska instructional aides to become teachers. We conclude with some recommendations about how policymakers might help recruit and keep quality teachers for all Alaska schools.
students have fared poorly on the test are precisely those that have experienced the highest rates of teacher turnover. Addressing the turnover problem will not likely be sufficient, by itself, to improve student achievement in these districts—but it may well be a necessary condition.

The recent federal No Child Left Behind legislation also underlines the importance of reducing teacher turnover, if we assume lower turnover would help improve student achievement. The new federal law requires accountability among states “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.”

If a state fails to improve achievement among disadvantaged students, the U.S. Department of Education can reduce the amount of federal money the state may use for administration of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) programs. Therefore, failing to improve student achievement at schools that don’t meet academic standards will have profound consequences not only for the communities and the districts in which these schools are located, but for the state as a whole.

Teacher Turnover: Higher in Most But Not All Rural Districts

Of Alaska’s 53 school districts, we classified the four largest—Anchorage School District, Fairbanks North Star Schools, Juneau Borough Schools, and Mat-Su Schools—as urban. Two thirds of Alaska’s teachers work in those districts.

The other 49 districts we classified as rural. Only about a third of Alaska’s teachers work in rural districts—but in recent years those districts have hired more than half of all new teachers. The next several figures make it plain why rural districts hire a disproportionate share of new teachers: many—but not all—rural districts lose more teachers every year than urban districts do.

Figure 1 paints the broad picture of mobility among Alaska’s public school teachers, and it offers the first evidence that teacher turnover is much more of a problem for rural than for urban schools. At the end of the 1999-2000 school year:

- Most teachers stayed put—85 percent stayed either in the same school or the same district to teach the coming year. But only 76 percent of rural teachers stayed in the same district, compared with 91 percent of urban teachers.
- Relatively few teachers changed districts within Alaska, but those who did were mostly rural teachers who moved to other rural districts.
- About 60 percent of those who quit teaching in Alaska public schools were from rural districts. Keep in mind that these are teachers who quit teaching in Alaska public schools; some are now teaching elsewhere.

### Figure 1. What Did Teachers Do at the End of the 1999-2000 School Year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Alaska Public School Teachers</th>
<th>7,950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stayed at Same School</td>
<td>6,024 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed Schools Within Same District</td>
<td>743 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed to a different school district in Alaska</td>
<td>151 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopped teaching in Alaska public schools</td>
<td>1,028 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Stayed in Same District**
  - 91% Urban Teachers
  - 76% Rural Teachers
- **Left schools**
  - 64% Rural to rural
  - 24% Rural to urban
  - 12% Urban to rural
  - 12% Urban to urban

Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
Map 1 adds to the picture of teacher turnover, showing that not all Alaska districts and not even all rural districts have high turnover. To clarify which rural districts have higher or lower turnover, we divided them into three groups: (1) those with average annual turnover of 15 percent or less; (2) those with annual turnover between 16 and 29 percent; and (3) those with annual turnover of 30 percent or more. Turnover rates in districts with few teachers can change sharply from year to year, if just a few more teachers stay or leave; we attempted to compensate for such chance variation by using 5-year average turnover rates. The map on page 4 shows:

- Urban districts have annual turnover rates between 8 and 14 percent, around national averages.

- About a third of rural districts have turnover rates as low or lower than those in urban districts. Some of those districts are on the road system, but a number are coastal communities off the road system in southcentral and southeast Alaska.

- Most districts with the highest turnover rates—from 30 to 50 percent annually—are clustered in remote areas of the interior. Many districts in western and northern Alaska have somewhat lower but still high teacher turnover rates.

- Not all districts fit the pattern. For example, while many districts in southeast Alaska have relatively low rates, Skagway's rate falls among the highest. And conversely, the Bristol Bay district in southwest Alaska has lower turnover than Juneau.

Figure 2 on page 5 shows some measures of difference among districts with higher and lower teacher turnover.

- Urban districts and rural districts with low turnover have lower costs per student, higher household incomes, more experienced teachers, and smaller Alaska Native populations.

- Districts with the highest turnover have the highest costs per student, the lowest household incomes, the least experienced teachers, and the largest Native populations.
Map 1. Alaska School Districts, By Average Annual Teacher Turnover Rate, 1996-2000

Average Turnover Rate, 1996-2000

Urban Districts
- Fairbanks North Star Schools: 6%
- Matanuska-Susitna Schools: 8%
- Anchorage School District: 10%
- Juneau Borough Schools: 14%

Rural Districts, 15% or less
- Delta/Greely Schools: 3%
- Klawock City Schools: 3%
- Hoonah City Schools: 7%
- Kenai Peninsula Schools: 8%
- Sitka Borough Schools: 9%
- Bristol Bay Borough Schools: 9%
- Valdez City Schools: 9%
- Kodiak Island Borough Schools: 9%
- Petersburg City Schools: 9%
- Ketchikan Gateway Schools: 10%
- Wrangell City Schools: 11%
- Haines Borough School District: 12%
- Chugach Schools: 13%
- Cordova City Schools: 14%
- Annette Island Schools: 14%
- Tanana City Schools: 14%
- Denali Borough Schools: 15%

Rural Districts, 16-29%
- Kache City Schools: 17%
- Copper River Schools: 17%
- Alaska Gateway Schools: 18%
- Lower Kuskokwim Schools: 18%
- Nome City Schools: 19%
- Craig City Schools: 21%
- Dillingham City Schools: 22%
- Southwest Region Schools: 22%
- Lower Yukon Schools: 22%
- Unalaska City School District: 23%
- Southeast Island Schools: 23%
- North Slope Borough Schools: 25%
- Northwest Arctic Schools: 26%
- Yukon-Koyukuk Schools: 26%
- Aleutian Region Schools: 27%
- Kashumuniut School District: 28%
- Galena City Schools: 28%
- Chatham Schools: 29%
- Yakutat School District: 29%
- Bering Straits Schools: 29%

Rural Districts, 30% or more
- Nenana City Schools: 30%
- Kuspuk Schools: 30%
- Pribilof School District: 30%
- Skagway City Schools: 31%
- Yukon Flats Schools: 31%
- Iditarod Area Schools: 33%
- Lake and Peninsula Schools: 36%
- Pelican City Schools: 37%
- Aleutians East School District: 37%
- Yupiit School District: 39%
- Hydaburg City Schools: 40%
- Saint Mary's School District: 50%

Source: ISER calculations from Alaska Teacher Placement data
Figure 2. Comparing Characteristics of Districts, By Average Annual Turnover Rate, 1996-2000

Average Numbers of Students in District, 2001
- Urban districts: 1,299
- Rural districts 15% or less: 1,014
- Rural districts 16-29%: 282
- Rural districts 30% or more: 350 - 2800

Average Numbers of Teachers in District, 2001
- Urban districts: 88
- Rural districts 15% or less: 67
- Rural districts 16-29%: 29

Average Base Salary of Teachers, 2001
- Urban districts: $31,394
- Rural districts 15% or less: $32,447
- Rural districts 16-29%: $35,988
- Rural districts 30% or more: $34,313

Expenditures per Student, 1999
- Urban districts: $6,473
- Rural districts 15% or less: $9,571
- Rural districts 16-29%: $12,172
- Rural districts 30% or more: $15,994

Percent of Teachers with at least 3 years' experience, 2001
- Urban districts: 75%
- Rural districts 15% or less: 85%
- Rural districts 16-29%: 68%
- Rural districts 30% or more: 67%

Percent Alaska Native Population, 2000
- Urban districts: 11%
- Rural districts 15% or less: 33%
- Rural districts 16-29%: 57%
- Rural districts 30% or more: 64%

Median Household Income, 2000
- Urban districts: $51,454
- Rural districts 15% or less: $46,436
- Rural districts 16-29%: $41,087
- Rural districts 30% or more: $37,284

a For urban districts, we show the range rather than the average, which is misleading because Anchorage has many times more teachers and students than any other district.

b The proportion of experienced teachers in the low-turnover rural districts is significantly higher than in the other districts.

c We calculated the proportion of Alaska Natives within district groups by giving equal weight to each community within the district, regardless of total population, and then averaging across districts. This method reveals the average Native population at the community level—which is the measure most relevant to this study.

Sources: Alaska Teacher Placement; Alaska Department of Education and Early Development; Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development; U.S. Bureau of the Census
Why Teachers Leave Jobs: Personal and Professional Reasons

Having looked at how many teachers leave their jobs, we then looked at why they leave. We surveyed a sample of 239 teachers who left their jobs in Alaska schools at the end of the 2000-2001 school year. We had a 51 percent response rate from the urban surveys and a 59 percent response rate from the rural surveys. Figures 3 through 7 summarize what they told us.

- More than half the teachers who left their jobs after the 2000-2001 school year moved to new districts—either in Alaska or elsewhere—while about 28 percent quit teaching and the remaining 19 percent retired (Figure 3).

- Rural teachers were more likely to leave their jobs to teach elsewhere, while urban teachers were more likely to retire. Roughly equal shares of urban and rural teachers also said they left their jobs to work outside education or to care for family members (Figure 4).

- Most teachers who retired said they did so because they became eligible for pensions. But more than half also said they were unhappy with some aspect of their jobs (Figure 5). Our sample of retiring teachers was so small that we didn't look separately at responses of urban and rural teachers.

**Figure 3. Composition of Alaska Teacher Turnover**
(Urban and Rural Teachers)

- 53% Moved to other districts
- 28% Quit teaching
- 19% Retired

Source: ISER survey of exiting Alaska teachers, 2001-02

**Figure 4. Top Reasons Why Alaska Teachers Left Jobs, 2000-01**
(Includes all Teachers Who Moved to Other Districts, Retired, or Quit Teaching)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Urban Teachers</th>
<th>Rural Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching elsewhere</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retiring</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working outside education</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for family members</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ISER survey of exiting teachers, 2001-02 N=112

**Figure 5. Selected Reasons Alaska Teachers Retired, 2000-01**
(Percentages of Retiring Teachers Citing Reason As Very Important or Important)

- Became eligible to receive full pension: 71%
- Dissatisfied with job description or responsibilities: 59%
- Dissatisfied with CHANGES in job description or responsibilities: 57%
- Retired for family or personal reasons: 55%
- Dissatisfied with teaching as a career: 50%

Source: ISER survey of exiting teachers, 2001-02 N=21
More than half those who quit teaching—including both urban and rural teachers—cited family and personal reasons or pursuing another career (Figure 6). Nearly half were also dissatisfied with their jobs. But less than one-quarter were unhappy with their pay or benefits.

Urban and rural teachers changed districts for significantly different reasons (Figure 7). All urban teachers cited family or personal reasons, while only about three-quarters of rural teachers did. A third of rural movers were looking for better medical care, while virtually no urban movers were. And half of urban movers wanted better pay or benefits, while only about 15 percent of rural movers did.

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**Figure 6. Selected Reasons Why Alaska Teachers Quit Teaching, 2000-2001**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage Rating as Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family or personal reasons</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing another career</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied with job description or responsibilities</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted better salary or benefits</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not agree with new reforms</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Urban Teachers: 73%  Rural Teachers: 55%

---

**Figure 7. Selected Reasons Why Teachers Changed Districts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers Rating Reason as Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal or family reasons*</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to live somewhere else</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to teach in another district or community</td>
<td>36%  57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied with community support</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For better medical care*</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better salaries or benefits*</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For better housing</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted better education opportunities for own children</td>
<td>0%  25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree with reforms</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Urban Teachers: 100%  Rural Teachers: 50%

*Difference in urban-rural responses is statistically significant.

Sources: ISER survey of exiting teachers, 2001-02  N=55
Job Satisfaction: Teachers Who Left Happy With Some Aspects of Job

We also wondered how large a part job dissatisfaction played in teachers' decisions to leave. So in our survey we asked teachers who left their jobs—including all those who changed districts, quit teaching, or retired—how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with a wide range of their job conditions (Figure 8). Many teachers from both urban and rural schools were surprisingly positive about a number of aspects of the schools they were leaving.

- More than half of both urban and rural teachers were satisfied with their school's emphasis on academic success, as well as with opportunities for professional development and pay and benefits. However, rural teachers were significantly more likely than urban teachers to be satisfied with their pay and benefits.
- Given the recent school security issues in some rural districts, it is noteworthy that more than 60 percent of rural teachers said they were satisfied with their schools’ security policies and more than eight in ten reported feeling safe in their schools. These responses were similar to those of urban teachers.

- Student behavior made both urban and rural teachers unhappy: nearly two-thirds said student behavior was a problem at their schools.
- Rural teachers were more likely to be dissatisfied with the motivation of students to learn, the support they received from parents and the community, and the opportunities to collaborate with other teachers.
- Urban teachers were more likely to say their classes were too large and that they didn't have enough computers and other instructional resources for their classrooms.
- These results support findings of national studies that emphasize the role working conditions—rather than primarily salary and benefits—play in teachers' decisions about staying or leaving.3

**Figure 8. Job Satisfaction Among Teachers Who Left Their Jobs, 2000-2001**
(Includes all Teachers Who Moved to Other Districts, Retired, or Quit Teaching)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions/Pay/Opportunity Measures</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior was a problem.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I received little support from parents.*</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school received little support from the community.</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school emphasized academic success.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had many opportunities to collaborate with other teachers.*</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school's security policies and practices were sufficient.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was satisfied with my salary and benefits.*</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pleased with the opportunities for professional growth and development.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference in urban-rural responses is statistically significant.
Source: ISER survey of exiting teachers, 2001-2002
Teacher Production: Fewer Teachers Graduating in Alaska

Some policymakers hope that Alaska can alleviate the shortages of teachers in some schools and some specialties by producing more teachers in Alaska. We examined data on numbers of elementary and secondary teachers graduating from Alaska’s colleges and universities in recent years. Most elementary and all secondary teacher graduates come from University of Alaska programs; Alaska Pacific University and Sheldon Jackson College graduate a few elementary teachers each year.

• Numbers of both elementary and secondary teachers graduating from Alaska institutions dropped sharply in recent years. Still, with the exception of some remote rural districts, Alaska schools typically have adequate numbers of elementary teachers.

• The large drop in numbers of secondary teachers graduating in Alaska—down from 127 in 1997-98 to 62 in 2000-01—is more worrisome, because shortages of secondary teachers are greater (Figure 9.) We don’t have the data to explain this decline in secondary graduates.

• Alaska certifies less than a third of the new special education teachers school districts need every year. All Alaska districts combined hired, on average, 52 special education teachers annually from 1996 to 2000. The University of Alaska Anchorage (the only certification program in Alaska) averaged about 15 special education graduates annually over the same period.

Instructional Aides: A Possible Source of Teachers, but Many Obstacles

With Alaska facing a shortage of teachers in remote districts, some policymakers are considering another pool of potential teachers: instructional aides. For remote rural districts that often suffer turnover rates of 25 percent or more a year, supporting resident instructional aides who want to become teachers seems an obvious strategy.

To learn about instructional aides working in Alaska classrooms, ISER surveyed a sample of urban and rural aides in the 2001-2002 school year. We asked them about educational levels and demographic characteristics and whether they were interested in becoming teachers—and if so, what impediments they saw to becoming certified.

We mailed out 249 surveys and received 103 responses. Among aides in urban schools, the response rate was 45 percent and among aides in rural schools 35 percent. We tried unsuccessfully to increase that response rate. Still, we think enough aides responded to provide useful information.

Figures 10 and 11 summarize aides’ demographic and educational characteristics:

• Almost all instructional aides in both urban and rural schools are women, and three quarters are married.

• Rural aides have on average nine years’ experience, compared with about six years among urban aides.

• Rural aides are far more likely to be Alaska Native, to be the primary wage earners in their families, and to rely on subsistence foods (Figure 10).

• Nearly 4 in 10 rural aides have only a high-school education, compared with about 1 in 10 urban aides (Figure 11).

• Only about 20 percent of rural aides and less than half of urban aides have the level of education required by the new No Child Left Behind law. Within the next few years, all aides paid with federal Title I money (which is money for economically disadvantaged students) will be required to have either two years of college education or to demonstrate requisite skills on a “formal state or local academic assessment.”
We asked aides whether they were working toward or interested in earning degrees—and if so, what impediments they saw. Those impediments are numerous, and many are different for rural than for urban aides (Figure 12). Aides reported:

- Money for tuition is a problem for virtually everyone.
- Availability of courses in their communities is a problem for more than three quarters of rural aides and just over half of urban aides.

- Many rural aides lack college-level reading and writing skills: nearly two-thirds of rural aides said they could not write at the college level and about a third said they could not read at the college level.
- Nearly two thirds of urban aides said school superintendents and school boards would not support aides’ efforts to get degrees.
- Finding affordable child care would be another hurdle, according to more than a quarter of urban aides and nearly half of rural aides.

### Figure 11. Education Levels Among Alaska Instructional Aides’ 2001-02 (Highest Level Completed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-school only*</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA degree</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate-level study</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Urban-rural difference is statistically significant.

Source: ISER survey of Alaska instructional aides, 2001-02  N=100

### Figure 12. Selected Impediments To Alaska Instructional Aides’ Obtaining Degrees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impediment</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack money for tuition</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required courses not available in community</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need better computer skills</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t write at college level</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack affordable child care</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack support from superintendent/school board</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack support from family/friends</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ISER survey of Alaska instructional aides, 2001-02  N=54
**Conclusions and Recommendations**

What do our findings tell us about possible ways of easing the shortages that exist in some specializations and in some rural districts? State and university policymakers may want to consider a number of options.

**Could Alaska Ease Teacher Shortages By Producing More Teachers?**

- Developing targeted programs could address specific shortages. Given the specific nature of Alaska’s teacher shortages, the university and the state may need to collaborate on programs designed to recruit and prepare teachers in the specializations where they are most needed. This would suggest collaboration with the historically difficult-to-staff districts to identify the specializations they need.

  But such programs would have to be adapted as circumstances changed, and predicting future shortages is always risky. However, most shortage areas—especially secondary science and math; special education; and difficult-to-staff remote rural districts—have proven persistent over the past decade. Developing programs to address those shortages is probably a safe bet.

- Developing programs specifically to prepare teachers for rural schools could address shortages in hard-to-staff rural districts. The university and the state need to develop programs to graduate more teachers who are permanent residents of rural communities. For more than a decade, the state has not funded any programs that specifically target the development of teachers in remote rural communities.

- Developing career ladders for and providing support to instructional aides could produce more teachers in remote districts. But these potential candidates face a legion of obstacles: affordable, quality day care; funds for tuition; maintaining their incomes as the primary breadwinners in their families; and the demands of subsistence activities in summer months, when they would otherwise be available for classes.

  Equally challenging is the inadequacy of their basic academic skills, with nearly 40 percent having no more than a high school education, almost two thirds lacking adequate writing skills, and a third lacking college-level reading skills. Recent changes in federal law make the availability of additional educational opportunities even more important for rural aides. Soon, school districts will be unable to use their Title I funds to pay aides whose educational levels don’t meet federal requirements.

  These challenges might seem insurmountable, the costs far greater than the current political will to address the obstacles. Yet, they must be viewed against what we know of the situation in many remote rural districts: persistent, debilitating levels of teacher turnover; the high costs of recruiting and training new teachers every year or two; persistent low student achievement; and mounting concerns about student behavior and motivation. Developing a core of teachers who are permanent residents of these communities could be the cornerstone of policies and programs to reverse these trends in remote rural districts.

**How Can We Improve Alaska’s Competitiveness?**

Data from the American Federation of Teachers indicate that Alaska teacher salaries—once the highest in the nation—have been declining for a decade and are now 40th among the states, when adjusted for Alaska’s higher living costs. And because Alaska depends so much on teachers recruited from outside the state, school districts here are particularly vulnerable to changes in the state’s competitive position.

- Raising salaries to keep up with those in other states is critical. Allocating more money to education at a time of declining state revenues and growing budgetary shortfalls seems unlikely. But if salaries continue to fall, hard-to-staff districts— as well as those that have not typically had to struggle to staff their schools—will find it increasingly difficult to compete for well-qualified teachers in areas where shortages are national. Schools in which students are already performing poorly on the state assessments will have to rely on unqualified or under-qualified teachers and will continue to suffer high teacher turnover rates.

**How Can We Reduce Turnover and Increase Recruitment?**

We’ve seen that while teacher turnover in Alaska’s urban districts is near national averages, some rural districts have annual turnover above 30 percent. When we asked rural teachers why they left their positions, half said that at least part of the reason was that they were dissatisfied with their jobs. Specifically, they were most dissatisfied with student motivation and behavior; community and parental support; the ability of their school leaders to communicate with them; and with the relevance of required professional development activities. Thus, while comparatively modest salaries may be hindering recruitment for hard-to-staff districts, it is working conditions rather than pay that is the primary issue for teachers leaving rural schools.

- School improvement efforts should include conversations between educators and the community on goals for the school and academic and behavioral expectations for students. Dealing with student motivation and behavior will require a concerted, collaborative effort by educators, on the one hand, and parents and community members, on the other. Problems with behavior and motivation can often be traced to inconsistent messages coming from home and school.

- Professional development for principals could help them broker the conversation between the school and the community about goals and expectations for student performance and behavior. The conversation required to develop common expectations for student behavior and school performance should
be at the core of communications between the school and the community. Each must listen to the other. Educators who do not plan to stay in the community need to make a special effort to hear what parents want from the school. The school principal is obviously the person to broker these conversations.

- District-and school-level professional development must include teachers in identifying their needs and planning activities. Districts and school administrators need to address teachers’ perception that much of their professional development is irrelevant to the issues and problems they face. A mounting body of evidence clearly demonstrates the importance of teachers’ involvement in planning their professional development.

- Induction programs that support teachers through the difficulties of the first year of teaching help keep them in the classroom. A major problem all states face is that a high number of new teachers—between 30 and 50 percent, depending on location—leave the profession within the first five years. Much of that attrition can be traced to the frustrations and sense of failure that new teachers feel.

Research from California has shown that induction programs for new teachers can dramatically reduce the number leaving the profession in their first few years. The State of Alaska should fund induction programs in all districts, especially those with high rates of teacher turnover. Districts can work in collaboration with the University of Alaska and NEA-Alaska to prepare teachers as mentors. The costs of such a program need to be weighed against the costs of recruiting and training new teachers.

In conclusion, the shortages that some Alaska districts face are unlikely to disappear in either the short- or long-term, without major policy changes at the state and district levels and at the University of Alaska. Although graduating more teachers should clearly remain a goal, the evidence suggests that we cannot simply “produce” our way out of our current shortages. Policymakers must address the conditions that cause high rates of turnover and difficulties in recruiting in some districts, if all students in all Alaska’s schools are to have the opportunities to learn that they need and deserve.