



The Rural School Principal

Opportunities and Challenges

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This brief shares insights, experiences, and recommendations from members of the Rural Educators' Community of Practice (CoP). Organized by the Region 15 Comprehensive Center at WestEd, the CoP supports rural education leaders at the state and local levels in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah.

Why Retaining Rural Principals Is Important

A focus on leader retention is a high-value investment. As trusted government officials, rural principals often serve as the heartbeat of their communities. They also provide significant benefits to student learning, with each principal influencing nearly 350 students on average.

With this in mind, it is notable that their annual turnover rate is approximately 20 percent nationally. Data also indicates that 42 percent of principals are considering leaving the profession at any given time. Principal retention is particularly difficult in schools with high concentrations of students from under-resourced households, a condition in many rural communities. Fewer than half of rural principals in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah remained at the same school from fall 2016 to fall 2020. This

turnover is costly, as the minimum cost of replacing a principal is \$38,000—a large expense for rural schools.¹

The Benefits and Challenges of Rural Leadership

Many challenges facing rural principals are not unique to rural communities but are widespread national issues. That said, solutions are successful when they relate to specific community contexts. As Allison Layland of the Academic Development Institute explained, “What we haven’t figured out is how to create sustainable, long-lasting solutions. This calls for community-based problem-solving, coalition-building, and deep integration of this work in rural communities.”

Melissa Sadorf, National Rural Education Association President and retired rural Arizona superintendent echoed this sentiment, explaining,

Rural recruitment and retention needs to be a community effort, not just a school district effort, because people moving into our local areas sometimes feel like outsiders. And if we’re not welcoming them, they’re more likely to leave in a three-to-five-year window.

CoP members also identified the following challenges specific to leaders in rural communities.

- Rural settings have fewer resources compared to urban areas.
- Housing stock can be old and scarce.
- Rural leaders wear multiple hats (e.g., “I unclogged toilets, changed five light bulbs, cleaned up a sick child’s mess, and shoveled snow this week.”).
- Rural communities often have high rates of students with special needs.
- Grow-your-own initiatives sometimes result in educators and leaders who do not have broader professional experiences to know what is possible.
- There can be large social divides, low graduation rates, and concerns about poor health.
- Educators from outside the community are difficult to attract and retain.

¹ The data in this paragraph come from a CoP presentation by Reino Makkonen about his 2021 REL West study, [Principal Retention Patterns in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah](#), done in partnership with Karina Jaquet. The study tracked principal retention rates from 2016–2020 in the western states, providing insights into when principals tend to stay or leave their roles.

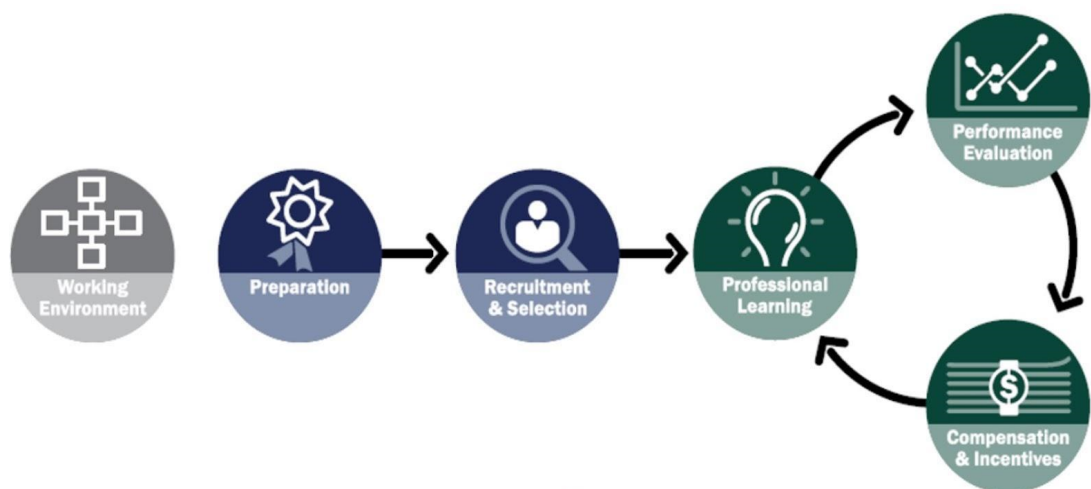
Kristin Turner, Paloma Elementary School District Superintendent in Arizona, explained that leaders in small rural districts have the same requirements as those working in large urban districts. Still, there are often fewer staff members to do the work. She stated, “In a smaller district, you have to do more as a single-site administrator, where you do the role of three different people, and then you have five other people in your district who also have multiple roles.”

While there are challenges, there are also many benefits to being a rural education leader. Communicating these positive stories with those outside rural communities can support leader recruitment and retention. In this effort, CoP members shared insights about the positive aspects of rural school leadership. They noted factors such as experiencing the unique family atmosphere of rural communities, having opportunities to be at the center of a close-knit community, and having a passion for one’s students, school, and community.

What support is needed?

Principals need a great deal of support to succeed at each stage of their professional pathway, particularly in rural settings. The pathway, outlined in Figure 1, includes the stages of leadership preparation, recruitment and selection, ongoing professional learning, performance evaluation, and compensation.

Figure 1. The Principal Pathway



Strategies to support rural principal retention along this pathway include providing opportunities for principals to participate in networks to enable learning with and from one another, increasing access to rural leadership training and mentorship, and

providing access to sufficient and affordable housing for principals and their teachers. Rural districts with higher principal retention rates tend to have substantial state-level support for these efforts, such as the state-sponsored Principal Support Network in Utah.

CoP members offered some strategies that rural principals can enact themselves to support their role, including creating strong, positive relationships; raising expectations for what is possible for students; setting boundaries so that others understand they are not in the principal role 24 hours a day and 7 days a week; and going “outside the box” to bring in resources. Glen Lineberry, Miami High School Principal and Executive Director of the Arizona Student Opportunity Collaborative, talked about how mapping community assets—that is, inventorying local talents and other resources—can support finding untraditional local resources to address education needs:

At Miami [Arizona], we had a math teacher whose dad ran a heavy die-cutting factory all the time he was growing up, and he worked there all the way through college. So suddenly, we had this math teacher who was able to teach some real metal shop type of stuff. We had an English teacher who had worked in restaurants and bars for 30 years and started a great culinary program. What’s really cool about this is that we all know that CTE [career technical education] instruction supports math and English, and we all know that you can embed really useful math and English lessons into CTE. But when you have everybody’s junior and senior English teacher also teaching culinary arts, or you have the teacher who teaches upper-level math teaching a shop class, the kids’ perceptions of that false dichotomy between academics and CTE disappear. And so, that asset mapping has a critical role to play in internal school improvement.

Asset mapping stories can help demonstrate the benefits of teaching and leading in rural communities and influence policy requirements for rural districts.

Conclusion

Principals are an important part of any rural community. They wear multiple hats, from determining the direction of their schools to changing light bulbs in campus hallways. Their roles go beyond ensuring quality education for children—they also

help support the quality of life for their communities. Principals' ability to adequately prepare for their roles, maintain a sense of personal and professional well-being, and effectively support students and staff is critical for the success of rural education efforts. When rural principals are well supported, they can more easily provide opportunities for students to learn the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to their own communities effectively. These efforts collectively propel rural economic development and sustainability.

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