

Rural Quality: Small districts are focusing on recruitment strategies and distance education to employ highly qualified teachers

By Ann McClure
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The highly qualified teacher requirement of No Child Left Behind is one tenet that everyone agrees sounds good on paper, yet no state was able to meet the 2005-2006 deadline to have a highly qualified teacher in every core course by the end of the school year. It wasn't for lack of trying; in some cases the candidates didn't exist, in other cases outside factors came into play.

Ostensibly, the two extremes of the school spectrum-urban and rural-are having the most challenges filling positions with highly qualified teachers. A wide range of reasons are cited for this, including undesirable working conditions, or lack of funds for competitive salaries. States with large rural populations deploy a variety of tactics to recruit candidates.

Kansas

According to the Kansas State Department of Education Revised State Plan For Meeting Highly Qualified Teacher Goal In No Child Left Behind, which was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in July, 165 of 300 unified school districts in the state were identified as rural under the Rural Education Achievement Program. Fifteen of the 165 rural districts meet the 100 percent HQT requirement. The state takes advantage of the rural school exception, which allows a rural teacher who teaches multiple, related classes (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, and general science) to be considered highly qualified as long as the teacher was highly qualified in at least one of the areas.

"So far we have done very well [meeting the requirement]," says John Morton, superintendent of Newton Public Schools USD 373. Last year all teachers in the district were highly qualified. The district made good use of the law's grace period to get its paperwork in order. Some teachers had submitted under the wrong category and others were reassigned to an area in which they would be highly qualified. "Not a lot of people are teaching out of subject," he says. The district also sponsored professional development opportunities and paid for ELL endorsements. They also take more care in reviewing an applicant's qualifications during the hiring process.

Morton attributes at least part of their ability to attract HQTs to the district's location 30 miles north of Wichita. The proximity to the highway gives teachers mobility, with two-thirds living in the district and one-third outside.

The district has "put more money and time" into recruiting efforts. Representatives attend job fairs, post positions online and maintain good relations with the local colleges

and universities. "Everybody wins" when universities host recruitment fairs for the school districts, he points out.

Although the district considers applicants from out of state, it does not actively recruit out of state because there is not always a reciprocal agreement between states when it comes to licensing teachers. He suggests it would help everyone if there were a common metric in place for all states when it came to licensing.

Once they find highly qualified teachers, they work hard to keep them. The district has a mentoring program in place where a master teacher is teamed with a new teacher. "We recognized the need to provide as much support for new employees as possible," Morton says, adding that research shows most teachers leave during the first five years. The district also provides ongoing professional development, has a full-time grant writer, instructional coaches for reading and math, wireless labs in every building and a computer for every teacher. "We try to make the environment as positive as possible," he explains. He describes salaries as "middle of the range" compared to other districts the same size. The board has discussed incentive pay for hard-to-fill positions, such as special education, and other perks, such as facilitating home loans. But Morton says health insurance is an issue and they have lost some candidates because of it. He hopes it will be addressed in the next budget.

"Technology is a key to change," Morton says. The district is looking into online learning options, and he says all the districts are going to have to be more involved in sharing resources.

Maine

Paul Stearns, superintendent of School Administrative District #4 in Guilford, Maine, is already using distance education for classes when they "simply cannot find qualified teachers." The state has an Asynchronous Transfer Mode network in place, and the district high school has had a lab, which includes four TV monitors, very sensitive microphones, and automated cameras that follow the teacher, in place for eight years. The difficult part has been coordinating scheduling with other schools. A teacher at the district can offer a class, and students in up to three other schools can participate. The program is funded through e-Rate, and in-kind trade handles teachers' pay for the classes.

The district also posts jobs online at www.servingschools.com, which Stearns calls the "bible for [education] job searches" in Maine.

A close relationship is maintained with the local university, and the district tries to work around student graduation dates when there is an open position.

"We're more concerned with state certification," Stearns says. The district offers ongoing professional development programs and, under the teacher contract, the district will pay for up to three graduate credits and the requisite textbooks per year. He explains that diminishing student enrollment has led to some creative staffing efforts, and the existing staff is working to become certified in their minors so they can teach additional subjects. Having multiple master's degrees does not automatically guarantee a teacher more money as it does in some districts, so the district budget is not taxed.

"Many of those teachers [pursuing additional degrees] are veterans, which is exciting," Stearns says.

He wishes there could be more flexibility for rural schools to utilize "top quality staff" already in the system, pointing out that when elementary enrollment shrinks the district can release a teacher if it has to but at the high school level teachers are specialists. "One of the frustrations is a person might be a fantastic teacher and great with kids, but they are teaching math and we need someone to lead a reading group," he says. "It's important to have an understanding of your subject matter, but also important to be effective."

Stearns acknowledges that the district's distance from large towns sometimes creates difficulties in recruiting. "Out-of-state people are used to a different level of social services," he says.

"We can't match the salaries of the more affluent districts," he says. "We try to stress the human side of things." The district has a mentoring program for teachers working on certification, and a new teacher induction program to help people become familiar with the area. "People need an adequate wage, but the quality of the people you work with helps retain professionals."

Stearns advises other rural schools to "continue doing the good things that can only happen in small school settings." He says rural schools are under attack across the nation, but they are the best place for the day-to-day job of building relationships.
Montana

"We have more cows than students," says Montana State Superintendent Linda McCulloch. The state of Montana spent three years working with the U.S. DOE to explain the state's licensing system and how teachers are prepared. McCulloch explains the state doesn't believe that "taking a paper and pencil test" will prove someone has the capacity to teach. They negotiated the ability to use "multiple measures," including an applicant's performance in content area and other classes, and student teaching practicum.

"Quite frankly, we've had high standards for licensure all along," McCulloch says, adding when they have teacher layoffs recruiters come from out of state to perform interviews.

The state works closely with colleges and universities that offer teacher education programs to ensure that future teachers are well prepared. She says the higher education institutes need to understand what the local schools are seeking in order to properly prepare students.

Under NCLB, social studies teachers are required to be certified in history, government, geography, and economics, unlike science, where teachers certified in one area are allowed to teach other areas. Under one program Montana developed, colleges offer a "broad field" degree that covers all the courses required for a future social studies teacher. "It's not realistic [for teachers to major in all four areas]," McCulloch says, adding that in Montana social studies teachers would teach all the topics.

"If you don't have an intimate relationship [with local higher education], you need to develop it," McCulloch advises.

The state maintains an online job board where districts can list requirements and job seekers can perform searches and set up interviews. The "Troops to Teachers" and "Transition to Teaching" programs are also utilized to bring in candidates, and a teaching internship program is in place to allow existing teachers to become qualified in other subject areas. According to the state plan submitted to the U.S. DOE, "the internship program is an arrangement among the teacher, district, and an accredited teacher education program. If a district is unable to fill a position, the district is permitted to assign a teacher on staff to teach an out-of-field core academic subject class, on the condition that the teacher enroll in a Montana institution of higher education's accredited teacher education program in that subject area. The intern is given a three-year time line to complete the course work necessary for an additional endorsement and to meet the HQT definition through the Montana high objective uniform state standards of evaluation."

Districts have also set up cooperatives to share teachers of hard-to-fill subjects, such as special education.

"We do have the best teachers in the nation in Montana," McCulloch maintains. She acknowledges these methods work in Montana but might not work in other states. "NCLB doesn't look at what works for our students."

Ann McClure is associate editor.

Virtual Solution

Maine isn't the only state using video conferencing technology to fill gaps in its educational offerings. Imperial County in California covers 17 school districts and 59 schools with 36,000 students. The Imperial County Office of Education has been running a video conferencing network for eight years and was recently put in charge of the state's entire K-12 network. Alan Phillips, the district's Video Conferencing Specialist, explains the county originally applied for a Federal Challenge Grant to establish the local network because they wanted to use the technology to bring resources to their geographically isolated area.

"Usage runs the gamut from courses to projects," Phillips says. Schools use the system to share teachers, have high school students mentor younger students, for professional development and administrators use it for meetings. He says when the network was used locally it was easy to control and manage. Now that it is state-wide, questions are being raised about how teachers are paid and what type of supervision students in remote locations should receive, i.e., from a licensed teacher or a paraprofessional. But his office maintains open communication with the state department of education.

Success stories Phillips shared include middle school students who completed their school's math offerings and were able to move onto high school courses, and high school students receiving college credit from a community college.

The district teamed with the local utility company to deploy fiber for an IP network so the

schools can conference as often as needed without paying line charges. The district worked with Polycom to determine hardware that would meet the schools' needs and be affordable enough to deploy in every classroom.

As a Polycom education coordinator Elaine Shuck travels to schools considering deploying video conferencing systems and discusses how other schools are using the systems. A former teacher from South Dakota, she is familiar with the Dakota Digital Network, which connects "almost every school" in the state through a state Web site. She says the network is used for everything from offering core courses, to students taking college credit, to educating homebound students, to virtual field trips. "Virtual learning is part of the curriculum," she says.

Schools don't have to invent the wheel to provide virtual classes. Virtual High School is one company that provides online courses. CEO Liz Pape explains the company is a nonprofit that does not offer diplomas. Instead it "provides resources schools need to provide distance education." A school would pay a membership fee to join, then have one of its teachers offer a class. If 25 students enroll, the school has earned 25 seats for its own students. VHS maintains the course catalogue and trains teachers to teach online. Pape says distance education is not only a way for schools to meet the highly qualified teacher requirement in NCLB, but to expand offerings to students in general. "Schools can't always hire a teacher for one class or student," she points out.

Florida Virtual Schools was established in 1997 to offer courses statewide in Florida for everything from credit recovery to courses not offered locally. The organization has expanded to offer training to teachers in other states and help states establish their own virtual school system.

Recognizing that distance learning is growing, the National Education Association developed a policy on the matter. The policy says, in part, that as long as a teacher is licensed in his or her subject, it shouldn't matter what state issued the license. It also says that teachers should be involved in the decision to utilize distance education, and that technology should be used to enhance, not replace, traditional education methods. www2.nea.org/he/policy13.html

Defining Rural

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "There are at least three major classification systems used by Federal agencies to classify the urbanicity of particular geographic or governmental units."

The Beal Codes have nine categories. The first three are for metro counties, which can range in population from less than 250,000 to more than 1 million; the next four are for urban areas, which range from 2,500 to 20,000 or more and are broken down by proximity to a metro area; and codes 8 and 9 are for areas that are "completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population" adjacent or not to a metro area.

It might be easier to go with the definition on the USDA's Economic Research Service: "According to official U.S. Census Bureau definitions, rural areas comprise open country

and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents."

There's also REAP/Flex, a designation in NCLB indicating that a district qualifies for the exception to the 100 percent Highly Qualified Teachers rule. To qualify, a school district must either have fewer than 600 students in average daily attendance or be located in a county with fewer than 10 people per square mile. Also, all schools in the district must be located in communities with fewer than 2,500 residents.