While the problem of teacher shortages affects many school districts in the nation, rural areas face a unique set of problems, causing the teacher shortage crisis to be more pronounced in these areas, as noted by an article in The Washington Post [2]. Furthermore, many solutions for urban settings do not successfully transfer to rural settings. In addition to dealing with the problems that all types of districts face, such as the increase in stringent accountability systems and a change in the public's perception of the teaching profession, rural districts also face challenges such as lower salaries, fears of isolation in an unfamiliar area, limited housing and recreational options, and a lack of human capital and resources.

According to an article in a Washington-based newspaper, The Spokesman-Review [3], state and national research shows that urban areas have lower teacher turnover rates than rural areas. The article refers to a study by the United States Department of Education, which found that teachers “prefer to work in schools with large concentrations of relatively high-income, low-minority, high-achieving students with lower discipline issues and more parent support,” and where resources offer lower class sizes, higher quality facilities, and more administrative and supportive staff.

Rural areas also usually do not have as many economic opportunities, which presents problems for teachers such as the difficulty for their spouse or partner to find work in the same area. Likewise, social opportunities are often less prevalent than urban areas, which makes many teachers from outside the area fear isolation. These same issues make it harder to recruit school administrators, which further compounds the teacher recruitment problem since teachers want to be supported by a strong administrative staff.

Rural areas typically have a smaller tax base to pool money for teacher salaries. According to an article in Supporting Education [4], rural teachers make $12,000 less than urban teachers on average. For example, in Colorado teachers can make up to $63,000 on average in urban districts like Boulder Valley. In rural districts, the average teacher salary is around $22,700, which is $14,000 less than the average state salary for teachers, according to The Denver Post [5]. The problem persists even when adjusting for cost of living, according to a policy brief by The Rural School and Community Trust [6].

“It’s difficult to attract and keep teachers when they’re pulled and poached away,” said Matt Kinnunen, the principal of Tranquility Elementary School in the rural district of Golden Plains United located in California, in an article by EdSource [7]. He said administrators in his rural area struggle to recruit and then retain teachers for a substantial period, as many are often lured away by better salary offers in urban areas.

Not only are teachers leaving rural areas, but the pipeline for educators is diminishing as well, with the number of students pursuing a degree in education in Arizona’s public universities down by 18 percent from 2008 to 2016, according to an article in The Arizona Republic [8]. In the rural Mississippi Delta area, elementary teaching degrees have fallen by 30 percent in the state’s traditional certification programs since 2010, as noted by a Mississippi-based newspaper, The Clarion-Ledger [9].
This has led many districts to hire teachers without the proper licensure, resulting in some districts being placed on probation. Because of perceived disadvantages to teaching in rural areas, such as lower salaries, a decrease in the number of teachers overall often has a disproportionate effect on rural areas compared to urban areas.

The Learning Policy Institute [10] ranked Colorado as one of the lowest states for “teacher attractiveness,” based on the state’s wages, working conditions, and the percentage of experienced teachers being well below the national average. In response, the Colorado Department of Higher Education has published a special report [11] detailing the reasons for the teacher shortage crisis, particularly in rural areas. The remoteness and lower salaries in Colorado’s rural districts compound the statewide problem by making it hard for these districts to recruit from the shrinking pool of teachers.

Due to these challenges, states are working to examine the teacher shortage crisis differently in rural areas than urban areas and enact policies that can specifically target these areas. State leaders aim to develop systems for making distinctions between urban and rural areas to make differentiated strategies. To read about state policies addressing this issue, check out the second part [12] of this blog series.

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