Teacher shortages are becoming a serious issue in many states, and officials have begun to enact policies to address the problem. States are also starting to recognize the need to use different strategies to address shortages in rural and urban communities.

Earlier this year in Colorado, the state Legislature issued $300,000 for programs specifically designed to address this problem in rural areas, according to The Washington Post [2]. Previously, Colorado passed House Bill 17-1003 [3], which required the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) and the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) to analyze the recruitment, preparation and retention of teachers extensively. As a result, the CDHE and CDE proposed transportation and technology stipends for rural teachers and student teachers placed in rural schools. The Legislature also passed Senate Bill 18-147 [3] with bipartisan support to offer teacher loan forgiveness for those that teach in rural areas.

Additionally, Colorado issued $2.2 million to the University of Northern Colorado to work with rural districts on addressing the shortage of teachers. The university used these funds to establish the Colorado Center for Rural Education to prepare future educators to teach in rural areas. They also issued stipends and promoted mentoring and professional development for students who would teach in rural areas. One “grow your own” strategy will offer to pay for a student’s last 36 credit hours if they commit to teaching for three years in their home district.

Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane Douglas laid out a plan in October 2015 titled “AZ Kids Can’t Afford to Wait!” [4], which included proposals for leadership training and mentoring for teachers. A proposed sales tax increase would raise about $400 million, some of which would be used to raise teacher salaries. The state has adopted a strategy of hiring teachers without the traditional certifications as long as they have a bachelor’s degree or five years of relevant work experience. Gov. Doug Ducey said he believes this policy will bring in quality teachers and allow schools to minimize their teacher shortages. On the other hand, teacher unions and Douglas have said they do not support the policy. “In my opinion, lowering the standards for new teachers is not the way to correct the problem,” Douglas said in a prepared statement. [5]

Similarly, districts in other states have proposed to loosen the requirements for teaching. The rural district of Golden Plains Unified [6] in California’s Central Valley has hired teachers with intern credentials or permits. A Mississippi bill aimed to help districts in the rural Mississippi Delta [7] proposed lowering the required ACT score for the state’s teacher licensing program from 21 to 18 and instead require an additional 50 hours of professional development, but this bill ultimately did not pass. The Nevada Department of Education [8] approved the issuing of provisional licenses to out-of-state teachers, bypassing previous certification requirements. Oklahoma [9] has approved emergency certifications, issuing 1,167 in 2015 alone, which allows someone without a traditional teaching certification to teach for one year.

Other strategies to increase the number of teachers include allowing retired teachers to return to the
classroom while still receiving their full benefits, something that has been proposed in Colorado, Mississippi and Oklahoma. Oklahoma also formed a task force [10] to address the problem, which has adopted policies that would reduce barriers for out-of-state teachers and offer scholarships for those that took teacher licensing tests.

While the Indiana Legislature has proposed several bills to address their shortage crisis, the only bill to pass was a scholarship bill for the Next Generation Hoosier Educators Scholarship [11], which provides scholarships for high achieving students to go to college to become teachers. This strategy could be one of the causes of an 18 percent increase [12] in the number of college graduates who earned their initial practitioner licenses from 2015 to 2016.

While these policies of increasing the number of teachers are not specifically addressed towards rural areas, having more teachers will help mitigate the competition between rural and urban areas by decreasing the scarcity of teachers. Many of these strategies focus on monetary incentives for teachers and easing the path to teacher certification. However, some research has shown that monetary incentives and more teachers alone are not enough to recruit and retain teachers in rural areas.

A survey of 600 superintendents of rural areas [13] found that “promoting the advantages of teaching and living in the area” was far more effective than housing or relocation assistance and slightly more effective than salary benefits. For example, schools in the rural area of Pryor, Montana, have strong housing subsidizing incentives and competitive federal loan forgiveness options, but they still struggle to maintain a full teaching staff.

Financial incentives cannot compensate for the advantages of wealthier districts, such as higher achieving students, more modern school buildings and more professional development opportunities. Salary increases are usually modest in size in the teaching field, and most teachers did not choose this career for monetary reasons in the first place. Most of the teachers in the Pryor area say they chose to teach there because of the chance to make a difference in impoverished children's lives, the small class sizes, and the flexibility and intimacy of a small town.

A study from the University of Arkansas [14] analyzed about 50 rural school districts and found that virtually none of them advertised these intangible incentives. According to this study, if states would partner with rural school districts to design and fund promotional efforts that align with these programs, in addition to increasing salaries and the number of teachers, they could begin to see better results.

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Tags:
Policy Area [15]›Education [16]›K-12 Education [17]›Teacher Training / Professional Development [18]