



# Rural Education Center

## SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS FOR REC

### TOP LINE SUMMARY:

- I. Summary of Participation
- II. Key Takeaway: Recruitment
- III. Key Takeaway: Retention
- IV. Key Takeaway: Satisfaction
- V. Overall Summary of Findings
- VI. Contact Information

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## I. SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION

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1513 people completed the online survey in total over a three week data collection period in May 2023. There were 75 school districts represented in responses, although 15 of those only had 1 person participate. Overall they show a predominantly female workforce who are mostly older than 35 and mostly white.

### Age Range

Age	Percentage
18-24	2.1%
25-34	16.0%
35-44	22.7%
45-54	28.6%
55-64	25.8%
65+	4.7%

### Gender

Gender	Percentage
Female	75.8%
Male	22.4%
Non-Binary	0.3%
Prefer Not to Say	1.6%

### Race & Ethnicity

Race & Ethnicity	Percentage
White	86.5%
Hispanic or Latino/a	4.2%
Native American or Alaskan Native	1.6%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.1%
Other or Multi Racial	1.3%
Black or African American	0.1%
Prefer Not to Say	5.4%

### Education

Education Level	Percentage
Master's Degree	46.1%
Bachelor's Degree	23.3%
Some College or Associate's Degree	20.9%
High School or Equivalent	8.3%
Doctoral Degree	1.5%

## I. SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATION, CONT.

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### Years in Rural School Districts

Years in Rural School Districts:	Percentage
Less Than One Year	6.1%
1 - 5 Years	26.1%
6-10 Years	20.4%
11-15 Years	12.0%
16-20 Years	12.0%
21+ Years	23.3%

### Employee Class

Class	Number	Percentage
Teaching Staff ( <i>Classroom teachers who typically have a degree, and are licensed or certified by the state.</i> )	785	51.9%
Administrative Staff ( <i>Principals, assistant principals, and department heads.</i> )	144	9.5%
Classified Support Staff ( <i>May include secretaries, office assistants, paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and other</i> )	369	24.4%
Certified Support Staff ( <i>Certified staff members, such as school counselors, and psychologists.</i> )	88	5.8%
Maintenance and Custodial Staff ( <i>Such as custodians, maintenance workers, and groundskeepers.</i> )	35	2.3%
Transportation Staff ( <i>Bus drivers and transportation managers.</i> )	28	1.9%
Food Service Staff ( <i>Cafeteria workers and food service managers.</i> )	25	1.7%
Technology Staff ( <i>Technology coordinators and IT support staff managing the school's technology.</i> )	9	0.6%
Other ( <i>Most Other responses were related to people working in more than one of the above listed roles.</i> )	90	2.0%

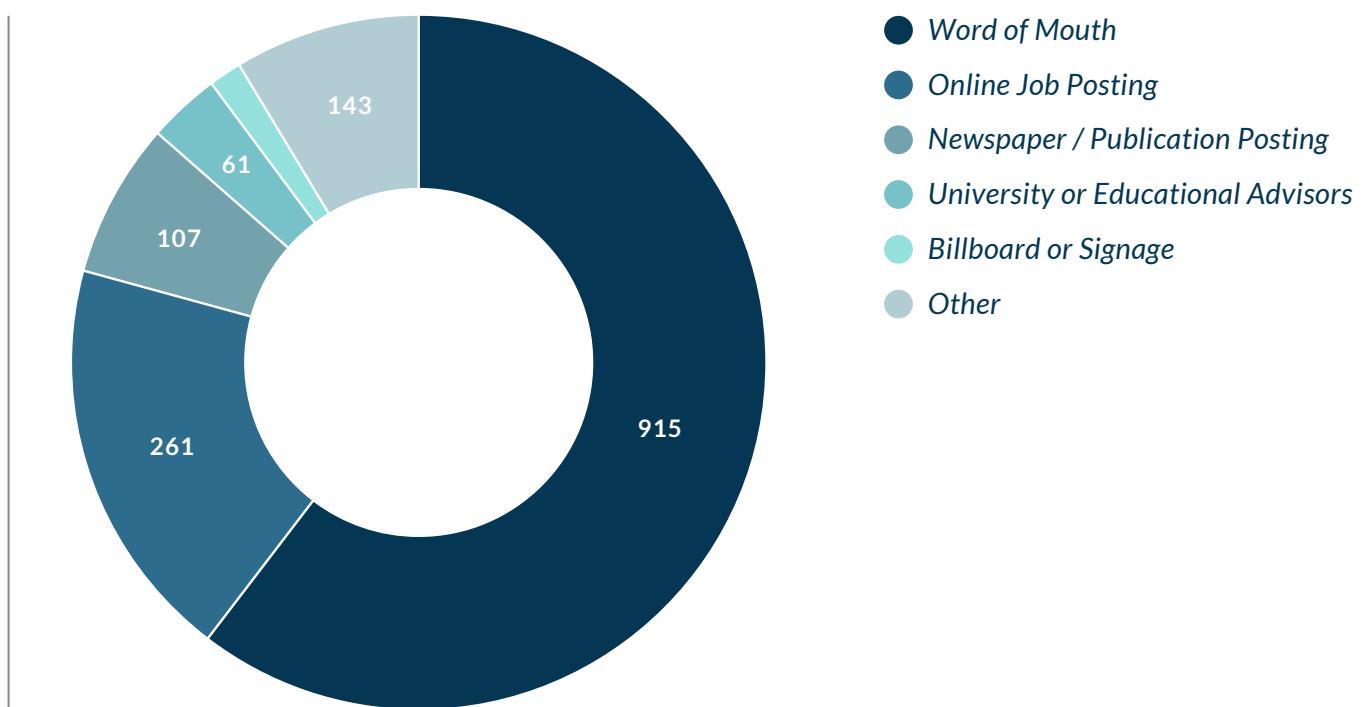
## KEY TAKEAWAYS

*Please note that for the majority of these questions, people were able to select more than one answer and so percentages generally exceed 100%*

### II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT

#### ***How do people come to work at rural schools?***

72.4% of participants applied only to rural schools which shows an intentionality around wanting to be, or already being in, a rural community. Over 60% of survey participants found out about their current role through word of mouth. An additional 4% heard about the position from their university or place of education. Of the 9.5% of survey participants who responded *Other* to the question “How did you find out about your current job?” the majority were either hired after filling a substitute position for the district, or were directly recruited or notified of the position by the school district because they were already working in a different district role.



## II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT, CONT.

### **Why do people choose rural districts?**

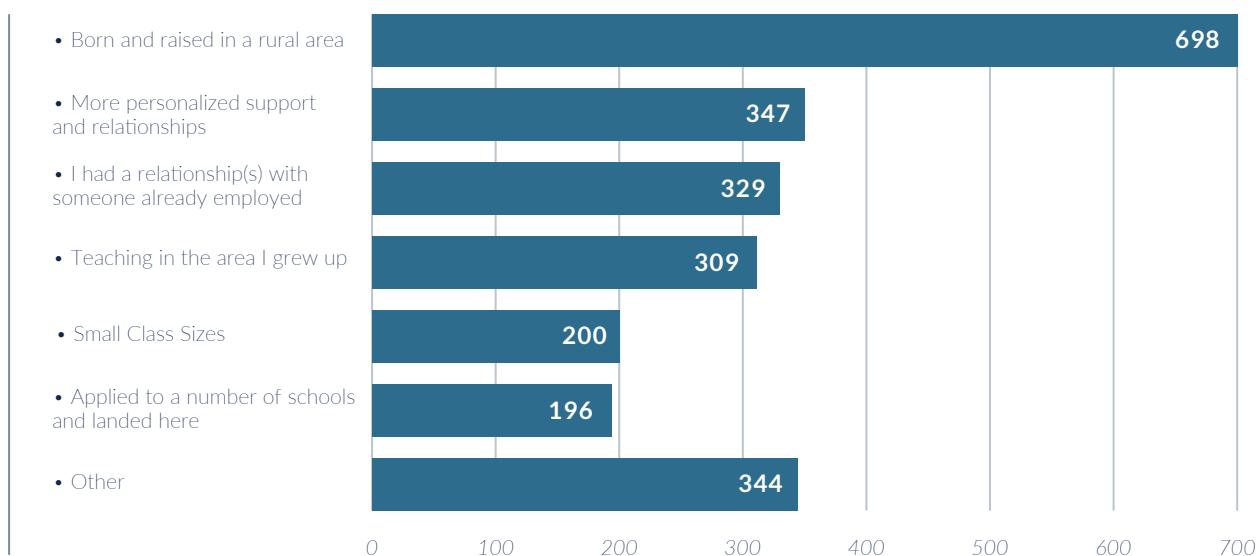
Looking at combined answers and noting people could select more than one response, the majority of people chose to work in a rural district because that was the environment they came from, with over half of people identifying they were born and raised in a rural area and about a quarter of participants being born and raised near where they are not working. About 22% of people applied because they had an existing relationship with someone employed at the school district. While most people identified proximity to home and family as their primary reason, about 23% named they were intentionally looking for the benefit of *more personalized support and relationships with coworkers and administrators*, and 13% *small class size*. 13% named they landed the job after applying for both rural and urban positions. This highlights that overall the majority of participants were intentional about wanting to work in a rural community. This was well reflected in this comment from one participant describing why they wanted to work in a rural district:

“

Opportunity to have an impact on our small community. Mostly being impactful to the student body. It would be nice to give them the same feeling I had from staff here when I attended school here. Giving back to the community that I grew up in.

”

### **What led you to choose to apply to work in a rural school district over an urban one?**



## II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT, CONT.

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### **What motivates people to become a teacher/employee in a rural community?**

The most common answer was *A sense of community and belonging* with 55.3%. 20% named *Unique challenges and rewards of rural teaching* and 7.3% *Opportunities for leadership and professional development*. 17.3% gave their own *Other* response with the most common response again being motivated by already living in that community and many people responding it just happened to be where they got hired first. Some additional examples of common *Other* comments included:

Controlling my curriculum	Access to outdoor activities
It was my initial teaching job, but once here, I didn't want to leave.	A great place to raise a family with community support
My kids go to school here	Wanted small class sizes.
Give back to the community in which I was raised.	Would not have chosen to be here, happened situationally.
Getting on the same schedule as my children to help with daycare costs.	

## II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT, CONT.

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### ***When considering job opportunities, what is most important?***

Over half of participants selected School Culture as most important. Related to school culture included Administrative support, Financial compensation, Opportunities for academic freedom, Career fulfillment, Benefits package each were individually selected by 18% - 27% of participants. Similarly, characteristics surrounding rural living such as Cost of Living, Ability to own home and/or land, Familiarity with region, we also each individually selected 21% - 26%.

#### **Most Important Factor When Considering Job Opportunities**

Factor	Percentage
School Culture	54.70%
Admin Support	27.80%
Familiarity With Location	25.60%
Ability to Own Home/Land	23.10%
Compensation	22.30%
Cost of Living	21.80%
Career Fulfillment	19.40%
Benefits	18.30%
Recommendations From Current Staff	7.00%
Proximity to Amenities	8.60%
Recommendations From the Community	4.90%
Childcare	3.60%
Community Demographics	2.50%
District Curriculum	1.20%
Other	3.80%

## II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT, CONT.

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### **What was the most significant barrier in finding work with a rural school?**

There was a significant portion of the 17% of people who responded *Other* who named they didn't experience any barriers at all. However 41% of people named *Compensation was too low* as the biggest barrier. *Location* was the next most common answer at 31%. Another common answer in *Other* was the lack of openings for desired positions, which would be added to 23.9% of people who named *Awareness of rural education job opportunities*, and 13.5% who named *Ability to find job posting*, to highlight where recruitment opportunities may not have been reaching people. In relation to culture, 14% named *Feeling unwelcome* and 13.5% named *Perception of working in rural education* as barriers. Across the people who responded *Other*, additional common responses included access to housing and childcare as barriers, as well as low turnover leading to low rates of openings for desired teaching positions.

### **Most Significant Barrier In Finding Work With a Rural School**

Barrier	Percentage
Awareness of Jobs	23.90%
Lack of Support	17.40%
Location	31.10%
Feeling Unwelcome	14.10%
Compensation	41.00%
Ability to Find Job	13.50%
Perception of Rural Education	13.50%
Information From Education Programs	12.30%
Cost of Education	12.00%
Other	17.40%

## II. KEY TAKEAWAY: RECRUITMENT, CONT.

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### ***What strategies could attract new teachers to rural school districts?***

In line with the previous question, 78.7% said Offering a competitive salary and benefits package. 56% named Highlighting the unique benefits of rural teaching. 20.8% named Providing more opportunities for professional growth and leadership, and 18.6% Better connection between education/certificate programs in rural school districts. Across the 5.9% that offered Other suggestions “housing access” was the number one suggested strategy. The second most common set of Other suggestions were related to overall staff support - including professional development, networking and peer mentorship with other districts, behavioral health and social support to prevent burnout, and strengthening Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work.

#### **Strategies to Attract New Teachers to Rural School Districts**

Strategy	Number	Percentage
Offering a Competitive Salary and Benefits	1190	78.7%
Highlighting the Unique Benefits of Rural Teaching, Such as a Sense of Community and a Lower Cost of Living	848	56.0%
Providing More Opportunities for Professional Growth and Leadership	315	20.8%
Better Connection Between Education/ Certification Programs and Rural School Districts	282	18.6%
Other	89	5.9%

### III: KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION

#### ***What is the most important thing to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural communities?***

The answer was clear here with 81% of respondents saying *Competitive salaries and benefits*. The next most common answer was *A sense of community and support among teachers* at 59.7%. 6.5% of respondents selected *Other* with the most common reason given being “available housing”. The second most common *Other* answer was related to the importance of creating a welcoming environment and some of the cultural challenges of living and working in smaller communities, with comments like:

“

*Educating others on small town living. Many teachers don't want to live in small towns and therefore just don't apply.*

”

“

*Administrators making new teachers feel a part of the culture immediately and it not be a "good ole boys" club you were just allowed to work in.*

”

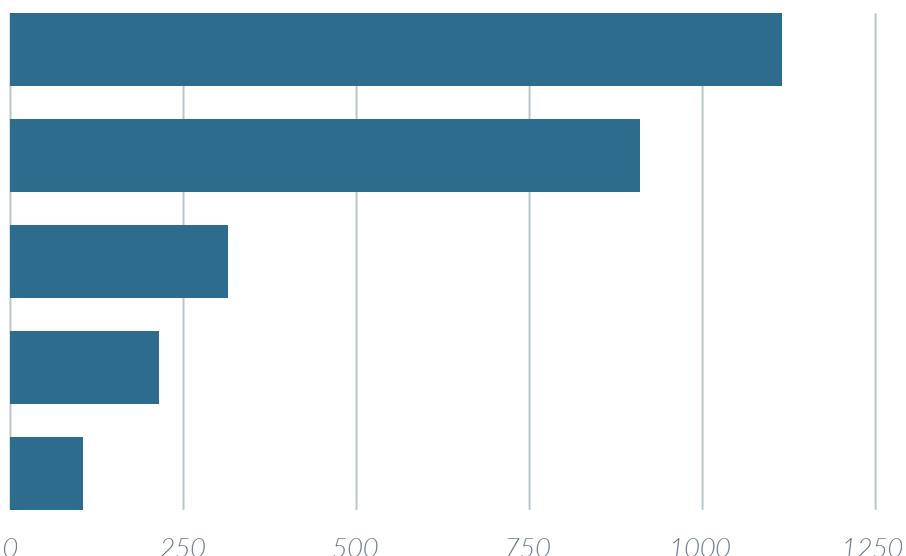
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*Difficult for single young people and the ability to meet a spouse.*

”

#### ***What is the most important thing to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural communities?***

- Salary and benefits



### III. KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION, CONT.

#### **What characteristics make a great co-worker?**

The top response was *Willingness to collaborate* at 53%, closely followed by *Ability to be flexible and deal with ambiguity* with 46%. Additionally answers were scattered closely and represented in the chart below.

#### **Characteristics That Make a Great Co-Worker**

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Willingness to Collaborate	804	53.10%
Ability to be Flexible and Deal With Ambiguity	697	46.10%
Willingness to Take Risks, Make Mistakes, Receive Feedback	418	27.60%
Ability to Think Outside of the Box/Innovate	404	26.70%
Patience	251	16.60%
Being a Self-Starter	235	15.50%
Years of Experience	32	2.10%
Other	36	2.40%

#### **Why have people considered leaving rural school districts?**

Of the options offered, the most common response was *Personal or family reasons* at 32%, however the next most common response was *Other* with 30% of people self defining their answers. Within that 30% about one third said they had never considered leaving. The rest were mostly comments about issues with salary and/or benefits, or trouble with school culture / management issues, which also ties to the 22.9% of people who directly called out a *Lack of resources or support*. A very common comment reflected throughout the survey was on the issue of burnout and feeling forced to play multiple roles in small districts, as one example:

“

You have to wear a lot of hats in small schools. There often aren't enough people to spread the workload around and it's easy to feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

”

An additional 8% said *Limited opportunities*, and 6.6% said *Isolation or feeling disconnected from the community*.

### III. KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION, CONT.

#### **How do you think we can improve and/or support new staff in our rural school district?**

Two answers tied for the top response with both *Higher Pay* and *More mentorship and Coaching* both receiving 26%. Overall 76% of participants reported that their district is doing somewhat well or very well at offering professional development and more general opportunities were not suggested as a top strategy. However specifically about 20% are asking for *More resources to support classroom management and instruction* and 16% asking for *Increased communication and collaboration among teachers*. Some of the suggestions from the 4.8% of people who offered *Other* comments matched previous themes such as offering housing, providing welcoming onboarding for people new to community, helping combat staff burnout with more supportive roles and services, with some standout comments including:

“

Better communication between ALL the staff!  
Make everyone feel like they matter, and  
they aren't just an after thought.

”

“

A big frustration is you are the only person in the district teaching your subject/ class. I miss having other teachers to gain ideas from in my content area.

”

“

Asking teachers for their opinions as to what professional development opportunities are set up by the district instead of doing some of the things the district has required us to do. The various grade levels have different needs from each other. What might be good for HS teachers may not be what Elementary teachers need.

”

“

Provide teacher housing. The idea that the cost of living in rural areas is lower is a dangerous myth.

”

“

Catering professional development opportunities to specific teaching areas instead of general areas that may not apply to everyone; more specific onboarding coaching about specific community aspects, district/community norms/etc.

”

### III. KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION, CONT.

#### **How do you think we can improve and/or support new staff in our rural school district?**

Additionally, we asked people to share *What do you think are the most effective ways to build a sense of community among employees in our rural school districts?* Responses showed a need to hold time for socializing and inclusion, such as:

“

Encourage collaboration, formal and informal staff meetings, social activities, regular staff appreciation.

”

“

Organizing events/opportunities for employees to interact and build relationships.

”

“

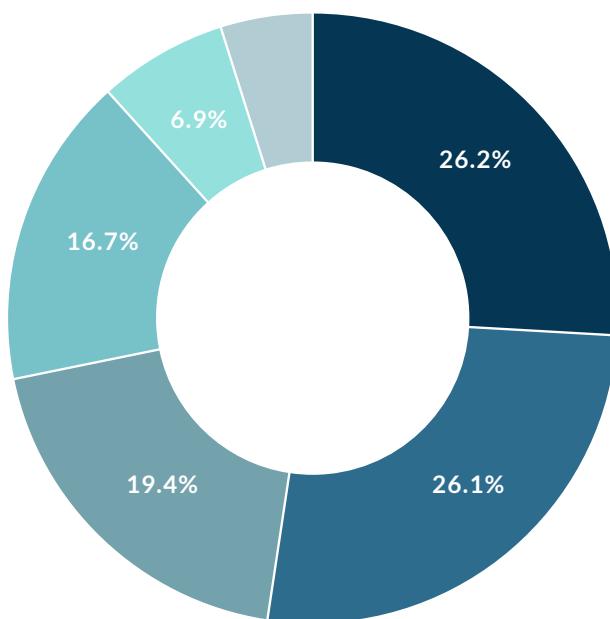
Team-building activities (as much as teachers groan about this I feel that it really does help us grow and get to know each other better) and more opportunities to socialize and collaborate with each other.

”

“

team building, having a compatible "buddy teacher" for support, informal gatherings at the beginning of the school year where employees can get to know one another.

”



- Higher Pay
- More Mentorship and Coaching
- Providing More Resources and Support for Classroom Management and Instruction
- Increasing Communication and Collaboration Among Teachers
- Offering More Professional Development Opportunities
- Other

### III. KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION, CONT.

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#### ***What support or resources would help improve staff retention and satisfaction?***

Answers to this question were relatively close together with a few themes appearing. “Higher pay” and “housing” continue to dominate suggestions in the open ended comments. *Improved communication and collaboration among teachers and administrators* came out on top at 32.5%. There is a theme around the isolation some teachers feel when they may be the only educator in their field in their district and lack peers to network and mentor with.

“

Our school district is doing a great job in supporting new staff. The teacher preparation programs are failing them with less requirements to become a teacher. They need more classroom management support.

”

“

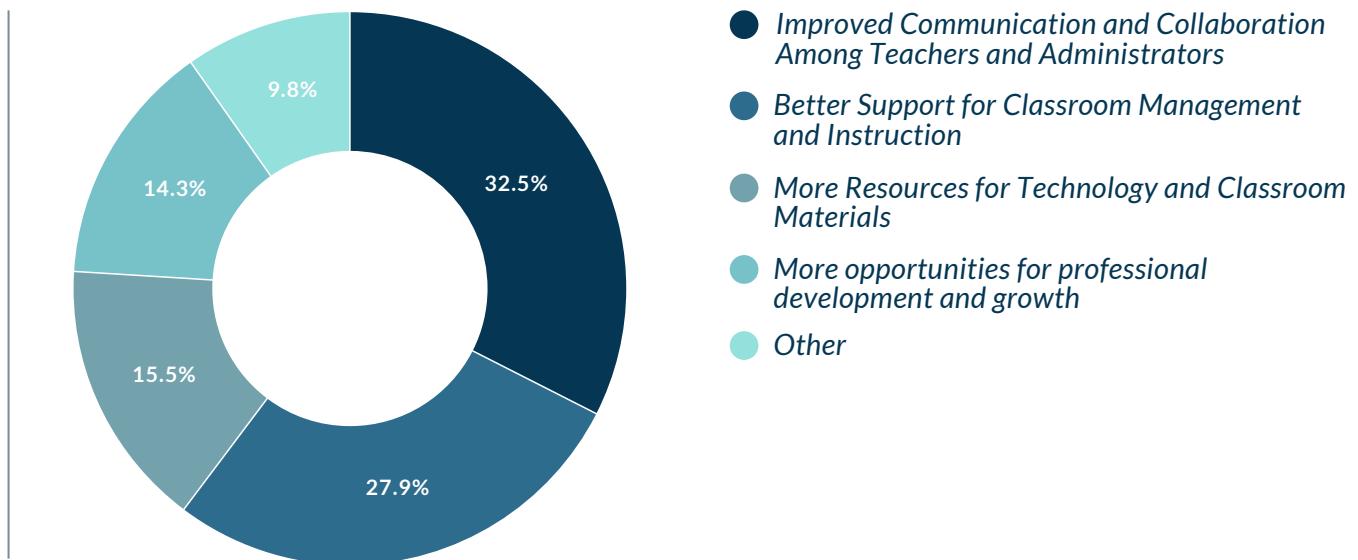
There needs to be a sense of “belonging” for our staff--many commute now from several miles away. Their family has placed roots in other communities. That is a tough thing to try and change--if teachers don't feel they “belong” or have a purpose in our small town and/or the school, why would they ask their family to move from where they are living? It might only be a matter of time and they might leave.

”

While mentioned above professional development was largely considered satisfactory, there were comments asking for more autonomy and flexibility in seeking professional development opportunities and giving input on what specific education is needed to keep up with student trends. Many commented that professional development is often offered when people have conflicting job responsibilities. Many asked for more access to “informal” professional development that can happen through peer learning and mentorship. Many participants commented on lack of consistency and clarity of guidelines and support for students with behavioral issues.

### III. KEY TAKEAWAY: RETENTION, CONT.

#### ***What support or resources would help improve staff retention and satisfaction?***



#### ***Additional suggestions from open-ended comments:***

“

Provide funding that will pay for the support that we need, this should include mental health counseling for staff and students, provide support in the classrooms so that teachers can teach.

”

“

Teacher mentoring. Teachers need to travel to other district to observe classes. We do not have multiple teachers for a grade level. They need support and ideas from other grade level/content area teachers.

”

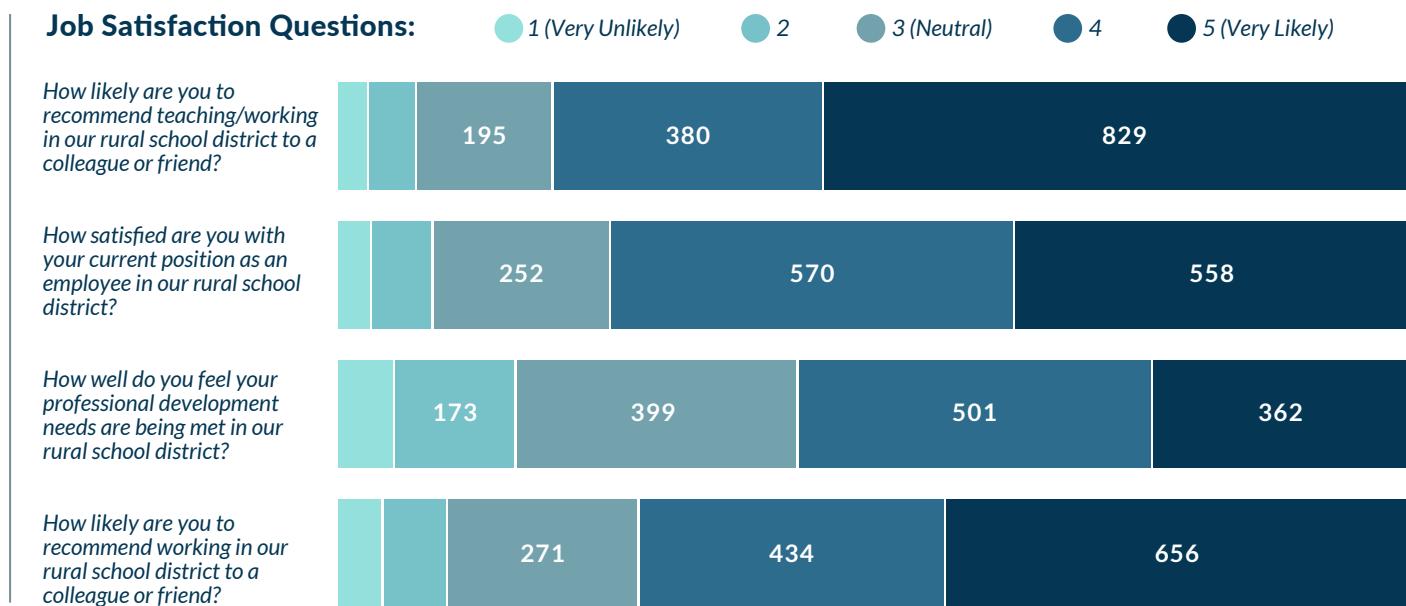
“

I think one of the main issues in our district is not having updated schools. Not having air conditioning and good drinking water for not only staff, but also students.

”

## IV. KEY TAKEAWAY: SATISFACTION

Overall it is clear that the majority of respondents would recommend working in the district and are mostly satisfied with their current position. Professional development had the widest range of responses which is reinforced in earlier answers and comments.



## V. OVERALL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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What we can take away from this data is that most rural school district employees are intentionally seeking out work in a rural school because they are drawn to the culture and community. Most people working in these rural districts were raised by rural school districts and see the unique benefits. A strong third have never considered leaving. People appreciate working in smaller communities where they feel closer to the direct impact of their work and really get to see how the students grow. Most people found their job through word of mouth or were directly recruited by the district, which speaks to how district employees themselves have been the greatest recruitment tool for districts. Continuing to support and elevate what makes staff love working in a rural community will continue to attract others, alongside of continuing to listen and address the concerns they present to belonging and thriving in their roles.

People felt somewhat satisfied with overall professional development opportunities but did name specific areas for improvement. Most common was a need for increased collaboration between departments and districts with many people commenting on the lack of peer networking and mentorship to keep up on best practices. Specific training and consistent implementation of policy for behavioral health and classroom management was the most requested PD topic. It was also commonly presented that PD opportunities were not always offered at flexible enough times to be available to all, and that teachers wanted more say in what kind of PD topics were accessible to them.

Similarly, so many district staff have multiple job titles and play multiple roles which commonly lead to people reporting feeling burned out and overwhelmed. Staff commented on the need for additional support roles to lessen the loads, and to offer behavioral health support for employees dealing with burnout and stress.

Housing shortages and difficulty of finding and affording childcare are certainly not problems exclusive to urban areas, and many participants shared a need to dispel a myth that cost of living was easier in rural areas. While the majority of employees are from a rural area already, there is around 20-30% who just happened to land there either because they cast a wide net in their job search or were following a spouse for whom housing is a particular barrier. It feels important to note that difficulty breaking into small town communities was a common experience for those who reported not being from the district they were teaching in. When asked about challenges for belonging, people both from and new to rural communities acknowledged it can be intimidating for newcomers to navigate becoming part of the community when there tend to be so many people who have known each other and been part of the district for so long. Many people suggested a greater emphasis on social activities and team building for staff, along with activities that engage the whole community not just school, would help to increase overall sense of belonging and create more opportunity to make newcomers feel welcome and get to know people.

## VI. CONTACT INFORMATION

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