

Recruiting, Hiring, and Training Alaska's Rural Teachers: How Superintendents Practice Place-Conscious Leadership

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This article describes how superintendents approach the administrative processes of recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers to work in Alaska's rural schools. Drawing from interviews of superintendents and administrators in 32 rural Alaska school districts, the data show not only the amount of time and responsibility that rural superintendents commit to these activities, but also how they regard community as central in guiding their execution of these tasks. Our findings underscore the integral role of rural superintendents in setting a place-conscious leadership tone for the districts they serve, as well as the risk of losing institutional memory and networks when these positions turn over.

The United States is in the midst of national teacher shortages that have been repeatedly characterized as a "crisis" (Gunn, 2018; Picchi, 2018) or a "perfect storm" of increased demand for teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010) concurrent with low enrollments in teacher education programs (Aragon, 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2014; King & Hampel, 2018; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016) and increased turnover rates (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Concomitantly, 2018 was characterized by teacher strikes and protests over wages, benefits, school funding, and working conditions (see Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). In this national context, how are rural schools meeting their teacher staffing needs?

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In 2016, we calculated the average per-teacher cost of turnover in Alaska using data from 37 of the state's 54 school districts (see DeFeo, Tran, Hirshberg, Cope, & Cravez, 2017). Interviews conducted as part of that study revealed that, unlike larger districts where these activities are often distributed across departments and personnel (see Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Levy, Joy, Ellis, Jablonski, & Karelitz, 2012; Milanowski & Odden, 2007), Alaska's rural superintendents are directly involved in many recruiting, hiring, and training activities. This article contributes to the emerging body of literature using a place-conscious framework to understand the relationship between district leadership and the community in meeting the unique and highly contextualized needs of rural school districts. We reanalyzed interview data from that study to explore how much time rural superintendents spend on teacher recruitment, selection and hiring, and training and orientation, and how their execution of those activities reflects a place-conscious approach to teacher staffing management. Our analysis not only highlights the remarkable workload of Alaska's rural superintendents, but also how they incorporate community as an integral guide for these activities. The data provide real-life examples of how a place-conscious framework is demonstrated in administrative tasks and personnel management decisions.

Recruiting, Hiring, and Training Teachers

The objective for all school districts is to hire skilled teachers and retain them in the classroom. Nationwide, the expected longevity of teachers starting in new schools is between 5.8 and 6.5 years (Cannon & Becker, 2015). When districts hire new teachers, they must offer the same onboarding and professional development (PD) programs each year, resulting in limited PD opportunities

for continuing teachers (Guin, 2004) or for school-wide, comprehensive PD that can help to unify staff (Shields et al., 2001). This situation erodes school climate by making it difficult to build a stable community within schools (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Carroll, 2007; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Shields et al., 2001) and impairs instructional quality by challenging the curricular planning and implementation process (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Guin, 2004). Ultimately, these dynamics result in decreased student achievement (Barnes et al., 2007; Levy, Fields, & Jablonski, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).

Beyond the noted effects on instruction and school function, teacher turnover also increases administrative workload. District-level administrative processes associated with finding a replacement are typically described in three distinct categories. *Recruitment* includes the activities necessary to find suitable applicants to fill an open teaching position. *Selection and hiring* includes screening, interviewing, and selecting applicants; background checks; contract preparation; school board approval; setting up payroll and benefits; creating accounts; updating web content; housing searches; and facilitating the state licensure process. *Orientation and training* activities are those that prepare and support new teachers as they transition to a new school or district. These activities include required trainings (e.g., mandatory reporting), curriculum training, team-building, mentoring, and district- or discipline-specific PD. All these activities must be managed administratively.

Rural schools often face hiring challenges of having both fewer applicants and fewer qualified applicants for teacher positions (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017), meaning that they must spend a disproportionate amount of resources on teacher recruitment (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). They also have higher rates of turnover (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2014; Monk, 2007), meaning they might do these activities more frequently per teaching position. When it comes to the division of responsibility for these tasks, rural school districts are characterized by higher administrator accountability (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Hammer et al., 2005): a smaller central office staff means that rural superintendents often serve in additional roles (Alsbury, 2008; Copeland, 2013; Tobin, 2006) such as curriculum director, school principal, transportation director, athletic director, or special education director (Hirshberg, Berman, DeFeo, & Hill, 2015; Forner, Bierlein-Palmer & Reeves, 2012) in addition to their the role of leader and manager. They also are more visible in managing community relationships (Copeland, 2013) and are often the only chief executive who can perform many administrative tasks for the district (Lamkin, 2006). As it relates to staffing, while large districts typically do hiring at the school level

and recruitment at the district level, rural leadership may do both at the district level with some help from school administrators (Levy et al., 2012). Though the activities associated with teacher recruitment, hiring, and staffing are described as a discrete set of tasks and procedures, how these tasks are executed affects the teacher candidate pool and ultimately the caliber of educators who staff classrooms.

Place-Conscious Leadership (PCL)

Place-based education (PBE) is a pedagogical framework often applied in rural places. PBE theorists contend that conventional schooling emphasizes decontextualized and standardized knowledge that devalues local cultures and identities (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014), disadvantaging local communities and children because attention is shifted from their immediate environment (Smith, 2007). PBE counters the deficit perspective that regards rural communities not for their assets, but simply as lacking the preferable amenities of urban places (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Biddle & Azano, 2016) by encouraging teachers and learners to embrace community connections (C. Knapp, 2014; Smith & Sobel, 2014) and ultimately develop sustainable relationships between human beings and the places where they live (Gruenewald, 2003).

Administering such a curriculum in rural communities must be more than a pedagogical strategy, but a school- or district-wide philosophy. If PBE regards the students' local community context as the focus for learning (Smith, 2013), leaders in these communities must view these same contexts as assets in leading and developing school environments and draw upon them to inform the processes that recruit and induct new educators into their communities. Teachers must be attuned to learning processes that occur within and at the intersection of diverse worldviews and knowledge systems (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005), and administrators must seek this ethos in hiring activities. Teachers also need time and guidance to understand communities not just cognitively, but socially and emotionally, and they need support to develop the skills to teach diverse student populations (Guin, 2004).

The literature on place-conscious leadership (PCL) describes the mutual and ongoing exchanges between leaders and place that shape and reshape one another (Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010; Morris, 2018). PCL has been described in public services contexts (Hambleton, 2011; Hambleton & Howard, 2013); when applied in education, PCL documents the role of the superintendent in creating coherent communities (M. Knapp, 2003), in developing strong community relationships (Copeland, 2013; Forner et al. 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Wrynski-Guden, 2014), and in consulting and including the community as an integral element of change-making (Mette & Scribner, 2014). To do this, leaders need not only a profound understanding of

the place and community (Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005) but also an established connectedness to it (Bauch, 2001; Harmon & Shafft, 2009).

Reviewing waves of PCL and critical PCL theories that have shaped our understanding of the superintendent's work in rural places, McHenry-Sorber & Budge (2018) argue that critical PCL's practice is overdue for a revision to fit with the contemporary rural superintendency. The authors lament that the critical PCL literature has only considered rural places as historically marginalized by external forces but has yet to scrutinize social inequalities that exist within those communities. To date, critical PCL has only been discussed in the field of ecojustice (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004) and in responses to outside policy mandates (Budge, 2010). Alaska is uniquely rural and an apropos setting to apply these theories.

Rural Alaska

Alaska is the largest and least densely populated U.S. state: its land mass is more than twice the size of Texas, but its statewide population is less than the city of Austin. In 2015-16, Alaska had 443 public schools, 58 (13%) of which had fewer than 25 students (Pierson & Stevens, 2017). Only one of the state's 54 school districts (Anchorage) is entirely urban/suburban; three (Fairbanks, Juneau, and Matanuska-Susitna) are mostly suburban, and one (Kenai Peninsula) primarily serves suburban communities but also encompasses rural areas. The remaining districts are wholly rural by most definitions. Outside Alaska's five large school districts, 12 mid-sized districts have enrollments between 1,000 and 5,000 students. Thirty-two small districts enroll between 100 and 999 students, and five very small districts have enrollments below 100, with the smallest district serving 13 students. As one superintendent described it, "We have 44 schools over a land mass the size of West Virginia, from 10 students to 600 students."¹

"Rural" in Alaska is a relative term, and quite different from other U.S. contexts. Pierson and Stevens (2017) note that traditional NCES locale codes are not appropriate for Alaska's context and defined the urban/rural divide in five² categories: *urban* includes all Alaska cities; *urban fringe* communities are within one hour's driving time (in good weather) or by ferry to a city with amenities; *rural fringe* communities are on the road system, but more than one hour's driving time to a city with amenities; *rural hub* communities are accessible only by plane but serve as

transportation centers for the region, from which airplanes take passengers to cities or remote-rural communities; and *remote-rural* communities are off-road, with small populations. Teacher turnover varies significantly by community type; annual turnover rates in urban, urban/rural fringe, rural hub, and remote-rural communities are 14, 16, 22, and 31% respectively (Pierson & Stevens, 2017).

The reasons for turnover also vary by community type: half of Alaska's rural teachers who leave their positions cite dissatisfaction with parent or community support, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation or loneliness (Hirshberg, Hill, & Kasemodel, 2014). Many teachers also report they misunderstood rural living conditions prior to their appointments (DeFeo, Hirshberg, & Hill, 2018). Teachers who receive their initial certification out of state have twice the turnover rates of Alaska-prepared educators (Hill & Hirshberg, 2013), but Alaska relies heavily on out-of-state talent.³

The superintendency in Alaska is also unique, characterized by geographical vastness and isolation, the need to serve a culturally unique student populations, and expectations of greater community engagement (Grant, 2000; Herbert, 2012; Jones & Ongtooguk, 2012). As in most places, Alaska's superintendents are hired by and serve at the pleasure of school boards (although Ahlman [1986] and Duffy [1993] note discrepancies in expectations and roles), and they are responsible for school district operations, budgets, curriculum standards, and external relations. Alaska's school districts are funded using a formula that combines student enrollments with geographic cost differentials, so district size and location can have a significant impact on how a central office is staffed and, consequently, how a superintendent's job is structured. Generally, superintendents in larger districts have multiple directors and/or assistant superintendents in their central offices. Their workload is characterized by public and political relations, working with the school board, dealing

³One way to combat turnover and to staff schools with teachers who are more place-oriented is to hire local and culturally similar educators who have these connections. Statewide, 64% of annual teacher hires are from "the lower 48," and for rural positions, it is 90% (Hill & Hirshberg, 2013). Alaska Natives make up 80% of the student population in rural Alaska but only 5% of teachers there (Hill & Hirshberg, 2013). Increasing the supply of Alaska-prepared teachers has been and remains currently a statewide priority (see Alaska Department of Education and Early Development's strategies for recruitment of teachers: <https://education.alaska.gov/teachercertification/strategies>); increasing the number of Alaska Native educators has been the target of several initiatives since the 1970s (see Leary, Tetpon, Hirshberg, & Hill, 2017). These efforts are ongoing, but at least in the short term, until enrollments and graduates of Alaska's teacher education programs increase sufficiently to accommodate this demand, the majority of teachers in rural districts will be hired from out of state.

¹A map of Alaskan school districts and communities can be found on the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development website: <https://education.alaska.gov/pdf/schoolmap.pdf>

²In most analyses, the *rural fringe* and *rural hub* categories are combined.

with crises, and meeting with district administrators. Those superintendents in mid-sized districts have a handful of directors but tend to assume some direct oversight responsibilities for which larger districts have intermediary administrators. Superintendents in small and very small districts may contract out some services like accounting and technology but still end up wearing the most varied hats in district operations: in Hirshberg et al.'s (2015) data that profiled Alaska school districts, eight superintendents were also the special education coordinator, five were also principals, and one oversaw two districts in addition to serving as a principal in one of them.

Hirshberg et al. (2015) also note that administrative support for superintendents also varies considerably. Many have part-time administrative assistants who also support the district school board, at least three share their administrative assistants with schools or with other divisions of the district, and some have no administrative assistant at all. Regardless of administrative support, compliance and reporting requirements are the same across all districts, and superintendents in small districts often complete this paperwork themselves. In all rural districts, superintendents described needing to be adaptable (Hirshberg et al., 2015). One superintendent enumerated some of the "other duties as assigned" to her position to include moving freight, shipping supplies to schools, ordering food for in-service meetings, taking the garbage out, driving the school bus, clearing clogged toilets, traveling with sports teams as a chaperone, and knowing load-bearing maximums for snow on building roofs. The variety of activities and responsibilities superintendents described not only implies knowledge and skills not commonly associated with their positions, but also higher touch and contact with students and communities. Teacher staffing—including but not limited to recruitment, selection and hiring, and training and orientation—is yet another duty in this list, and our data consider how these administrative processes fit into their broader leadership responsibilities.

Methods

The data used in this article were generated from a broader project to calculate teacher turnover costs in Alaska. In designing the study, we sought input from key stakeholders, including the Alaska Superintendents Association and district human resource professionals. We realized that teacher turnover activities are so variable that quantitative cost calculation could only happen following descriptive interviews to detail how districts operationalize these processes (see also Levy et al., 2012, who used a similar approach). We used an interview instrument from the Texas Center for Education Research (TCER; 2000)⁴

⁴Adapted with permission from the Texas Association of School Boards. See the Texas Center for Educational Research:

and adapted it to accommodate Alaskan contexts that are not relevant in many other states (e.g., teacher housing, air transportation, and communities not on a road system). The instrument was then reviewed by a consultant with expertise around difficult-to-staff teacher positions and members of the Alaska Superintendents Association, and it was piloted with three superintendents representing districts with different organizational structures and ways of splitting costs between school and district offices. With input from these education administrators and superintendents, the instrument was subsequently adjusted to increase its content and construct validity.

Data were collected in the spring and summer of 2016, and superintendents were asked to reflect on and provide data for their teacher turnover process in the 2014-15 school year, as well as hiring and recruitment activities that had been initiated since that time.⁵ We contacted superintendents in each of Alaska's 54 school districts and ultimately spoke to 41 superintendents and/or other district administrators (human resources directors, assistant superintendents, business managers, and administrative assistants). Our sample represents 32 entirely rural districts and all five of the urban/suburban districts. The data from the original study were reanalyzed around two new research questions:

- How much time do rural superintendents spend on teacher recruitment, selection and hiring, and training and orientation?
- How do superintendents' activities reflect a place-conscious approach to teacher staffing management?

For this reanalysis, we included data from superintendents who had responsibility for schools in Alaska's *rural hub/fringe* and *remote-rural* communities. Superintendents were emailed the instrument so they could review questions before the interviews, each of which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Though all the data reported in this article were generated from interviews, superintendents also referenced district personnel and fiscal records to provide more precise answers to our questions. The interview process guided superintendents through the teacher turnover activity categories to document the processes in a descriptive fashion. Using the funnel approach (Lopez, 2008), we asked the superintendent to walk through every activity that happens, start to finish, for each of the three activity categories. From those descriptions, the interviewers used follow-up questions to solicit details on

<http://www.tcer.org/research/index.aspx>

⁵The study was reviewed by the University of Alaska Anchorage's Institutional Review Board and, because the study interviewed superintendents as public officials in their professional capacity, was determined not to be human subjects research.

staff responsibilities and time commitments associated with them. Ultimately, these data were robust enough to derive time and effort estimates for discrete tasks, as well as to document the unique processes that each district employs. Interviews were conducted by four different researchers and at the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research; each was trained in in-depth interviewing and familiar with the literature on teacher turnover as well as the Alaska context, so they were able to adapt their approaches and ask appropriate follow-up questions.

For the time estimates, we first used provisional codes (Rosaline, 2007) to code teacher turnover tasks in each of the four activity categories and developed a comprehensive codebook with definitions (see Levin & McEwan, 2001; Milanowski & Odden, 2007). We compiled the codes to identify tasks routinely performed across most districts, then coded the person(s) responsible for each (see also DeFeo et al. [2017] for additional detail described in the broader study). To estimate the mean time allocated for a specific task statewide, we first calculated the amount of time each staff position in the district spends on that task, noting and calculating the superintendent's time within that tally. We then were able to estimate the mean hours allocated to the task by all district staff and calculate the amount of time shouldered by the superintendents.

For qualitative analysis, we used axial coding (Saldaña, 2015) to reanalyze the descriptive interview data through a theoretical lens of PCL. We first isolated significant statements (Riemen, 1986), and through an iterative process, we sorted them into meaning units (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) which ultimately were grouped to create the themes in the findings. The mixed-methods approach is depicted in Figure 1. For member checking, the larger study findings were shared at a meeting of the Alaska Superintendents Association and at the annual meetings of the Alaska School Business Officers and Alaska Teacher Placement associations, and these presentations included open discussions of findings.

Findings

For each teacher leaving the district, we calculated superintendents spend an average of 81.7 hours on discrete administrative tasks associated with selection and hiring and training and orientation. Additionally, although we were unable to calculate an average, superintendents also invest significant hours in recruitment. Table 1 depicts estimated time allocated on these tasks, showing the effort of all district staff and the superintendent for each time a new teacher is hired.

The qualitative analysis of *how* the superintendents manage these tasks yielded two key priorities (depicted in Figure 2): recruiting, selecting, and hiring teachers who would *fit the community*, and supporting teacher transition

to the community during training and orientation activities. In these data, the community emerged as an integral component, and evidenced a place-based approach to candidate selection and orientation processes.

Recruiting and Selecting the Right Candidate—Fit for Place

We were unable to calculate average time spent in recruitment activities. Though most rural superintendents travel to in- and out-of-state job fairs and engage informal networks with other administrators, community members, and external stakeholders, the amount of time and type of activities are highly variable depending on the number and type of positions sought (see also Loeb et al., 2005). Additionally, superintendents noted that recruitment activities happen continuously and informally and were thus difficult to quantify.

For selection and hiring activities, superintendents invest an average of 64.8 hours per teaching position. Although candidate interviews and scoring of applicants typically involve a committee of other district staff and community members, more than half of the total district hours dedicated to selection were completed by the superintendents. The lion's share of this time is spent in expected tasks such as pre-screening and selecting interview candidates from the applicant pool, communicating directly with candidates, reference calls, and formal and informal background checks. In the superintendents' descriptions of selection and hiring, we found what they prioritized in the candidate screening process and how they evaluated applicants were highly focused on fit for the school's community and culture. In addition, their approach to evaluating that fit evidenced ethos of PCL.

Ascertaining fit for community and culture. A key candidate screening characteristic is fit for community, and superintendents engage a rigorous process to ensure that it is fulfilled. One said, "We take the hiring process seriously to make sure people will fit. We don't just take anyone—if we can't find [a good candidate], we enlist retired teachers to come back until we can figure it out." Another elaborated,

You need to see the person in person. You need to see their mannerisms. We do a first interview, a second interview, and you're talking with them and greeting them, have a casual conversation so that you can see and understand an individual so that you have the right person to come to bush Alaska.

This vetting is important. Taking a teaching position in rural Alaska means relocating—often very long distances—to a new community and environment. The nature and scope of social activities are different than most other places in the United States, as are social needs and issues. Given that

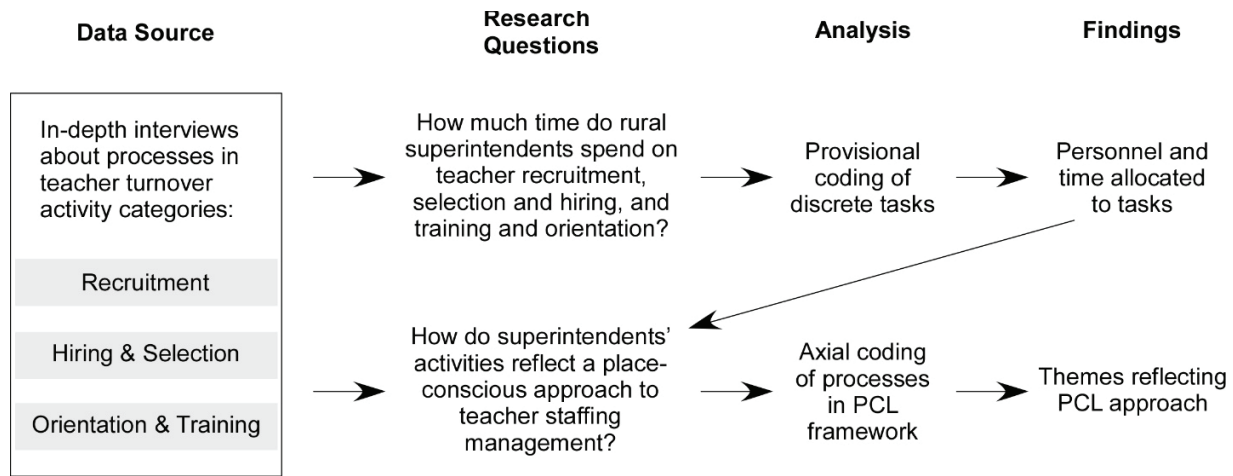


Figure 1. Data source, research questions, and analysis. The study used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to identify activities that rural superintendents perform as part of the teacher turnover process, and then to explore how they conduct or manage those activities with attention to PCL.

most rural educators are not from Alaska, superintendents expect few applicants to be familiar with village life or Indigenous culture, or to understand the isolation or how conditions of cold and dark affect living. Superintendents note that finding the right candidate to take a position in rural communities is important because

the social issues faced in some rural communities [are significant]. And teachers need to learn that they can't fix these things, and they probably shouldn't try. They don't want to get in a role where they are perceived as adversarial. If you try to save people from themselves, they don't take kindly to it, and you'll be run out.

The teachers' relationships with the community are essential for their own social experience, as well as for

the community. As one superintendent put it, "You can't calculate the stress for failing to hire people who don't [fit in or have] ... conflict with community. It's a non-stop high-stress situation."

Superintendents not only articulated the critical nature of fit; they described their process for ascertaining it. Many superintendents add an extra step to their pre-interview screening: before selecting candidates to move on to the interview stage, many superintendents call prospective teachers to tell them about their communities, usually spending more than an hour on the phone. The purpose of this call is twofold: to make sure candidates "know what they're getting into," and to give the superintendent the opportunity to personally introduce the community. As one superintendent said, "they can get a lot on a Google search," but it would fail to communicate the uniqueness and beauty of working in rural Alaska—something the superintendents

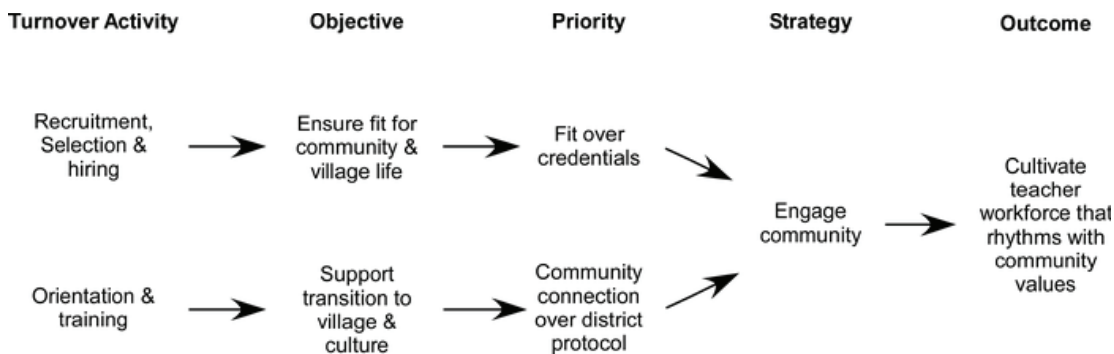


Figure 2. PCL in teacher turnover activities. Rural superintendents engage the community in teacher turnover activities to ensure fit and support transitions. Their attention to place ensures that they can recruit, hire, and train teachers to be culturally responsive and community-engaged educators.

Table 1

District and superintendent time spent in teacher hiring, recruitment, and training per teaching position

Activity Category & Task	n*	Mean hours	
		School District**	Superintendent
Hiring		108.9	64.8
Present candidate for school board approval	9		.9
Verify candidate interest*	6		2.2
Prepare contract	8		1.3
Interview candidates*	28		3.6
Call references	27		5.6
Identify candidates to interview	20		13.3
Determine candidate qualifications*	13		.7
Prepare for interview	17		1.8
Help new teachers with state certification process	17		5.7
Pre-screen applications	20		5.0
Conduct informal background check	5		5.3
Participate in hiring committee discussion	15		.9
Search for housing	13		3.6
Review transcripts	24		.6
Conduct formal background check	8		11.1
Set up building security	16		.5
Set up email account	19		1.0
Update website	13		+
Set up computer account and password	17		+
Establish payroll	20		2.0
Set up benefits	20		0
Training & Orientation		112.6	16.9
Plan or deliver orientation*	22		16.9
Serve as or arrange mentor*	15		+
Deliver district-sponsored professional development	2		+
Recruitment		+	+
Connect with informal network*	16		+
Participate in job fair	11		+
Update job posting	4		+

Note. This table summarizes district staff and superintendent time invested in teacher turnover activities, per teacher position. Detailed time estimates are provided for the superintendent, and compared with the whole-district efforts, which provided as by-category sum. Crosses (+) designate insufficient data to calculate time averages. Asterisks (*) denote activities whose execution showed significant attention to place.

*Our dataset contained responses from 32 rural Alaska school districts; however not all districts were able to provide detailed time estimates for all tasks. The n in this table denotes, per task, the number of participating districts reporting sufficient data for time calculations.

**Includes SI time.

want to impart. One superintendent described this phone call as “the good, the bad, and the ugly” and emphasized it was important to tell benefits and drawbacks and give the candidate the opportunity to ask questions. Another superintendent said,

The thing we try to do is try to be really, really up-front about what to expect. There are great things about living in a community of 4,000 people and some drawbacks. If you are someone who wants to go to shopping malls and movies every night, it’s not for you. I had one teacher who said they were tired of having to wave at everyone on the street. If you’re a teacher in a small community, you can’t be anonymous.

This conversation about the community and village life was not only for the district to size up the candidate, but a two-way dialogue and an opportunity for the candidate to ascertain fit for himself or herself as well. As one superintendent said, “They can make a big difference in the community, but the community might not meet the needs that they have for their own families.” Another described the substance of this conversation:

Often it’s also what they are expecting here. What would you like to see? Those are important questions. If they don’t ask, I bring up stuff—Have they been to [a] village? Do they know what to expect, or are they naïve? ... If [they’re not going to be] happy living in village or can’t understand [what it’s like], it won’t work for sure.

The superintendents also rely on the school community to facilitate communication, tapping in-service teachers to talk with prospective candidates. One said, “For some inside perspective, we’ll put [the candidate] in contact with a teacher at the site so they can get questions answered. We really want the candidate to know what they’re getting.”

Though superintendents hold the official responsibility in hiring decisions, they decentralize decision making by engaging elders and other representatives of the Native community, school board members, parents and family members, and students themselves—the ones who have the in-depth understanding about the place—as integral sources to navigate and reinforce hiring decisions. Districts often send community members to job fairs to meet and introduce the community to candidates, and for almost all rural Alaska communities, this inclusion incurs at least the cost of air travel and lodging. Most rural superintendents include community members on hiring committees. The fiscal obligation of this involvement reveals that engaging community members in recruitment and selection activities is not a token inclusion;

rather, their input is highly valued. This finding was further substantiated in how superintendents described the process. One superintendent said,

We have a discussion, and I don’t like to offer my input until everyone has an opportunity to speak. I want to make sure they are seeing same things I did. Some [of the committee members] are not educators, so especially parents and school board members..., they come to it through those lenses.

Villages and communities differ significantly from one another in size, amenities, demographic and geographic characteristics, and school-community relationships—even within a single school district. As none of Alaska’s superintendents are themselves Indigenous, they rely on the people who inhabit and make community in the places where teachers will ultimately live and work. This place-based ethos is necessarily reliant on community members, and the superintendent’s role in this case is not one of decision maker, but rather convener and dialogue facilitator.

Managing resources and networks in candidate selection. Such an extensive vetting process is not without expense or challenges, and superintendents were quick to note that the process was not always optimal. Superintendents want candidates to see communities that could become their homes, but distance is a challenge to this introduction. As flying a single candidate to a community from the lower 48 can cost thousands of dollars, many districts are unable to bring people to their communities for interviews, and they lamented this problem. One superintendent said, “It’s reasonable to want to meet people and see a community before making a big decision to move there, and they won’t take the job if they can’t do that.” Superintendents described using photographs and innovative practices like taking robots with two-way video into classrooms and around the school to provide this introduction, but they note this is an inadequate proxy for a community visit. Another superintendent thought an in-person community visit was so important that he shoulders this cost personally:

I really can’t [buy tickets] out of district funds. I just do it myself. It’s worth it to me.... I send [the cost of a plane ticket] to the business manager and say, ‘This is a donation to the district.’ Is it worth \$800 or \$1500 to [avoid hiring] someone I really don’t know. Teachers pay for supplies out of their own pocket all the time. I’ve negotiated offers that I know that I’m [personally] paying for. That’s okay. No one’s twisting my arm to do this.

How much this superintendent values this community connection is exemplified in his own fiscal commitment to

ensuring that it happens. However, a community visit for prospective teachers is the exception rather than the rule, and most new teachers commit to community sight and site unseen. Superintendents who could not offer community visits during interviews lamented that their inability to provide this “real” introduction was a hindrance to hiring community-oriented educators who would best fit in and establish meaningful relationships.

Noting that rural districts frequently have small applicant pools (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Loeb et al., 2005), which holds true in Alaska (Atwater, 2017), we understood how courting teacher candidates could be time-consuming, but we also wondered how selection could be so rigorous. With the Alaska hiring landscape being, as one superintendent put it, “a buyer’s market for teachers,” how often do districts have the luxury of choosing the best candidate and not filling vacancies with “whomever they can find” (Loeb et al., 2005, p. 58)? Our analysis showed that even though rural Alaska superintendents are often in competition for the same candidates, their attention to place and fit enables them to rely on one another to meet their hiring needs. Superintendents often refer candidates to one another at job fairs, following the screening and interview process, or when in-service teachers are looking for a change. A superintendent said,

The region tries to help one another out. When I’m interviewing a candidate, if I think they’re better for [another community in a different district], I will tell them that, and other districts would do the same thing. We look out for one another.

Another superintendent elaborated that this type of collaboration “comes [from] relationships built through the years and informal conversations. I’ll be visiting with other superintendents—we swap that kind of information—if anyone is looking for a change.” Superintendents’ awareness of their own communities, as well as familiarity with others, allows them to be place-conscious in their own hiring—and facilitate this for other districts. That a superintendent would prioritize fit for place over the immediacy of their own hiring needs is a testament to how highly they value it in their own communities and processes.

Bringing Teachers into the Community—Training and Orientation Are About Place

Attention to place is critical not just for attracting teachers to rural Alaska, but also to supporting them as they transition to their new communities, igniting their curiosity and passion for working there. On average, superintendents spend 16.9 hours per teaching position on training and orientation activities. Unlike hiring and selection, where superintendents shoulder the majority of

the district’s time investment, only 15% of total district staff time devoted to orientation and training is superintendent hours. This distribution reflects a collaborative approach; superintendents are directly involved in planning and facilitating orientation activities, but they are often delivered by a team that includes community members. In the design of teacher orientation and PD, superintendents are attentive to culture and community relationships first and technical curriculum training second. Attention to place is evidenced in two distinct ways: supporting transitions to village living and helping teachers to make community connections through orientation to local culture and ways of living.

Transition to village living. After teacher candidates are hired, attention shifts to bringing them into the community, and superintendents first facilitate logistics and planning. In districts that do not provide housing, finding a place for teachers to live becomes a community effort: “It’s tough to find housing. One of the hardest things to do. Sup, board members, [and] parents [are] all active in getting housing informally.” Teachers also need information—not only about the place they are moving to, but about how to live there. A superintendent noted, “Teachers have to bring in their own food, all that, and they might not understand how to do that.” One of the larger districts maintains a website with logistical information about remote rural living, but beyond information, all districts provide individualized support. Sometimes responsibility is distributed across central office staff, sometimes the teacher is assigned a mentor or contact at the school, and sometimes the superintendent provides this connection. Regardless of the person responsible, the support is high-touch. A superintendent described it:

Once I hire someone, I touch base with them weekly until they are here. Hire them in late spring—through the summer until they get here in late August. It’s about relationships. They can get cold feet, they can get scared.

Just before the school year starts, it is common for groups of new teachers in the district to meet in Anchorage or a hub community for an orientation before going to their unique sites. For example, one district does a “welcome to the world of bush teaching class,” and another does a remote-rural living orientation in the district’s hub community:

New teachers receive three days of specific orientation regarding their transition into the district and specifically living in remote villages. We take them shopping and show them how to order [supplies and food, how to] dress, integrate into the community, etc.

The common thread—and what makes this unique to rural school districts—is the need to help teachers

transition to a new environment. What makes it unique to Alaska is that basic life skills—like getting food and getting dressed in weather-appropriate clothing—are done so differently. This orientation is not just about supporting new educators as they transition to a new career—an experience that is challenging to teachers in and of itself (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kaufmann, Johnson, Kardos, & Peske, 2002). It is about helping teachers transition to an unfamiliar environment. As teachers leave their friends and family networks and plan to move thousands of miles away to a teaching assignment in a new culture and climate, superintendents are focused on supporting them in adapting to their new community and home.

Learn about local culture and ways of living. Upon finally arriving in their remote sites, the priorities of PD and mentoring are for new teachers to adapt to the community's atmosphere, learn about Native ways of living, establish a relationship with Indigenous knowledge systems, and engage with elders and community activities. In many districts, a cultural orientation takes place prior to content training and other educator-related PD, and these activities reflect the shared responsibility between the community and school district. As a superintendent noted, these activities are “how you make a connection—that cultural experience,” and this orientation necessarily engages the community—elders, parents, and people from outside of the school system. Though superintendents support cultural orientation, the content is driven by the communities themselves. One district

brings in community members ... who fly in for a day of preparation and then a day of presentation, then they continue this work for the entire first semester with those new teachers so they will have experience specific to [our region]—not generic [Alaska]—specific to their lifestyle.

Another district ensures that teachers have a “community orientation—including a tour with the mayor” as part of their new teacher onboarding experience.

Of note is not only the content of the orientation, but the place where it happens. These activities do not take place in a gymnasium or meeting room, but on the land itself.⁶ As one district described,

The tribe has set up a spirit camp during the first part of the year—it's 12 miles upriver on an island, a culture camp—and all new teachers [go to it].

⁶It is important to note that in rural Alaska, school buildings are often a central gathering place for community activities. However, when asked about teacher orientation, many superintendents stressed that it needed to move beyond the school gymnasium and onto the land.

The upper grades secondary school students go all week, and the younger students go on day trips. [The teachers] learn how to cut fish, dry fish, beading, language pieces—new teachers participate in that for a week—they get to know kids in different way, and the elders that come out. That starts school off different way.

Another district in a different geographic region “hire[s] local people and local boats and [runs] nightly fishing expeditions” to introduce teachers to the community way of living. Several of the culture orientations specifically involve the cultural tradition of making kuspuk—ensuring that “as a new teacher you had a new kuspuk,” and in so doing the orientation literally dresses teachers in community garb. Regardless of the form of the activities, superintendents communicated that they are “always about investing in our people,” and that investment includes community members and new teachers alike. Though these activities are planned around the arrival of new teachers, they also serve to reinforce school-community relationships.

Notably, as the objective of these activities is for teachers to connect to communities and form relationships, the superintendent takes a “back seat” role, deferring main content choices to the community. However, the scope and complexity of these activities necessarily requires the support of the school district—and there is an opportunity cost. The superintendents support these activities at a busy time in the school year, prioritizing community orientation over other PD opportunities, and commit resources and staff time for both new teachers and for the staff who participate and facilitate them. The superintendent's role is not to direct the activities, but rather to set a tone for their value and centrality to school functioning.

The emphasis of the orientation activities is engaging teachers in understanding the place where they would be working and establishing a foundation for teacher-community relationships, but these goals are not restricted to the week before school starts. As new teachers move into their classrooms to begin teaching, superintendents provide ongoing support to ensure they make and sustain community connections. Whether this support comes from principals, superintendents themselves, or mentor teachers, the superintendents' clear priority for new teachers is to “encourage them to get involved in [the] community.” As one superintendent said, “The key to success is establishing a relationship.” Training for workers entering a different cultural environment must address emotional and social factors, not just a cognitive understanding of cultural differences (Guin, 2004; Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009), and the unique cultural orientations described in our study align with this recommendation. The orientation activities that the superintendents described are not only a

necessary base for successful teacher transition, but also for teachers to later engage in place-based teaching.

Discussion

Our analysis found that rural superintendents invest significant time in teacher turnover activities, and that many recruitment, selection and hiring, and training and orientation activities are designed with attention to place. These tasks require time investments not only of the superintendent and district staff, but also from the community, with attention to ensuring that new teachers join and become active members. All these activities are necessary to meet district staffing needs, and they likely promote teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). From a place-conscious standpoint, the critical element is not only that these activities happen and how they are executed, but the positionality of the community as set by the superintendent. The superintendents did not say that teacher staffing and galvanizing community support in rural Alaska are without challenges, but the critical consideration is what the superintendents described as the roots of their hiring strengths and challenges. The superintendents do not problematize the communities, nor do they blame teachers. Rather, they focus on finding the right candidate by prioritizing fit for place over credentials or more traditional metrics of teacher quality and by regarding the community as powerful.

Fit for Place is Valued Over Resume Credentials

The teacher recruitment and selection process puts the candidate's fit for the community as a central and significant priority, and the superintendent's commitment to PCL serves both the needs of the community and of the teachers who will work there. Fit for the community and village life are so important that many superintendents consider these attributes over specific educator credentials or qualifications. "How teachers are chosen, it's based off relationship skills and content skills," said one superintendent, notably foregrounding the relationship over content knowledge. Another superintendent explained that she was "not saying people are not qualified or couldn't do good job, but because they were coming into a village [she] needed to get sense who they were" and gauge their disposition for the community. Another superintendent said she needs "to find people who knew what village life was like," and although she acknowledged the candidate "might have to work on other things," she noted, "we knew that" upon hire, and she is willing to invest in PD for the right person.

To be clear, none of the districts hire uncertificated candidates. Rather community fit is a preferred qualification—and a critical factor in hiring decisions. A

superintendent summarized the process: "[It] boils down to whether we think they'll be a good fit for our district. Education background, some of it is just subjective. We sit around and think about how would this person fit in?"

This emphasis on fit and place has been described before; Eppley (2009) notes that teacher quality in a rural context is not quantifiable in standardized indicators. As this fit needs to be complementary for the candidates and the community, Alaska's rural superintendents reiterated the need to be sensitive, flexible, and responsive to each hiring opportunity. They seek teachers who are likely to stay in the community, teachers who express interest in the community, or teachers who specifically communicate their interest in rural Alaska. In other words, they seek teachers who will themselves give attention to place and embrace a place-based philosophy and pedagogy.

Resilience: Community Is Power, Not Burden

In our data, PCL is evidenced in innovative practices that underscore community resilience and capitalize on strengths. Superintendents sometimes contend with pejorative conceptions of rural communities—as places "in the middle of nowhere" that lack conventional social activities or amenities. In recruiting teachers, superintendents must identify attitudes that are antithetical to their leadership and community-oriented goals (and avoid hiring those who hold them) but also respond to those comments and preconceptions. The superintendents discussed community realities with candidates and with us, but they did so unapologetically. Their comments frame the community as powerful and as central to their role—not a burden that inhibits their educative agenda. One said,

There is not much the district can do about isolation or weather... [But] we help out as much as we can. We want to be as supportive as we can, and when we find good staff members, we do everything we can to cultivate a continuing relationship.

While acknowledging challenges, comments like this one illustrate that superintendents do not blame or problematize communities. Instead they focus on their role—one of offering support and cultivating relationships that would ensure teachers made connections to be successful.

Since before World War II, the literature has called on rural communities to support teachers (see Biddle & Azano, 2016; Epstein, 2018; Tutwiler, 2017), and our data do not necessarily offer a novel concept, but rather an example of *how* it is done in practice. A number of superintendents in our study developed recruiting, hiring, and orientation processes around their unique community contexts and therein reinforce process-related community resilience

(Cutter et al., 2008). Recruiting and hiring are honest and focused on the unique experience that rural villages and cultures have to offer. One superintendent said, “We bill it as extreme or adventure.... For people who look for something different, you don’t have to join the Peace Corps.” Another emphasized the community’s beauty and uniqueness as a draw and to help newcomers connect to a special place: “People who come to remote Alaska come for an experience. We try to facilitate.... We try to explain to people we are not like everyone else.” This honest, strengths-based approach foregrounds the community’s resilience; rather than “sugar coating” their description of rural Alaska or apologizing for it, Alaska’s rural superintendents own the place and its identity.

Significance

Empirically, previous studies of teacher recruitment and turnover have focused on the monetary costs of these activities (Barnes et al., 2007; Karsan, 2007; Levy et al., 2012; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Synar & Maiden, 2012; Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, & Felsher, 2010). Studies document how these tasks divert districts’ resources from teaching and student development activities (Arens & Morin, 2016; Carroll, 2007; Guin, 2004; Hakanen et al., 2006; Levy et al., 2012; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Shockley, Guglielmino, & Watlington, 2006), and that districts experiencing high turnover must spend disproportionate amounts of time and resources on managing these human resource activities (Loeb et al., 2005; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; TCER, 2000; Watlington et al., 2010). However, no studies to date have explored *how* administrators engage in these activities. This study reveals that in rural Alaska, these activities are not mundane tasks. Rather, they are conducted and managed thoughtfully and guided by a broader, place-conscious philosophy. Instead of a cost, they are an investment in community-oriented education.

Theoretically, much work in PBE discusses the responsibility of teacher preparation programs in preparing culturally responsive educators (see Page, 2006; Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; White, 2008). Our data exemplify how this preparation can be scaffolded and nurtured by communities themselves and place-conscious leaders within them and provide tangible examples of how superintendents are achieving the “entry points” for critical PCL described by Furman and Gruenewald (2004): prioritizing fit for place over external credentialing systems exemplifies how they value community needs and a place-based school culture. Additionally, in their allocation of finite time and financial resources to community-based orientation activities, they evidence commitment to building a teacher workforce that has the capacity to engage and rhythm with local communities.

From a practical standpoint, the number and scope of tasks rural superintendents perform underscores their

responsibility for many processes not typically attributed to their role. This finding aligns with urban normalization critiques (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2014) and suggests that superintendent preparation must consider the unique dynamics of small schools and districts (Tobin, 2006)—with recognition that these places are not homogeneous (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Our data underscore that place-conscious superintendents have intimate knowledge of place and trusting relationships, which require time to develop (Bowers, 2001; Gruenewald, 2003). When superintendents leave, districts lose not only institutional memory, but also the connections and community familiarity. Noting that the mean tenure for a superintendent is just five to six years (Glass & Franceschini, 2007) and is even shorter in rural Alaska (Pierson & Stevens, 2017), we regard rural superintendent turnover as a threat to implementing place-based and place-conscious ethos in the rural communities where they are most needed.

Limitations

Though our work was done with integrity, the data and analysis have some significant limitations. Most obviously, this article presents a reanalysis of data collected for a quantitative study on the cost of teacher turnover in Alaska. The qualitative data were intended to be utilitarian: the uniqueness of the state and the districts and communities within it necessitated some descriptive information about teacher recruitment, hiring, and training activities for our purposes of assigning time and effort allocations to those tasks. As we looked at the depth of the qualitative comments, we realized we had an opportunity and obligation to analyze them with a different purpose and through a different lens. While our data are quite rich, if we had set out with these research questions as our primary objective, we would have asked more and different questions (and follow-up questions) about the superintendents’ relationships to places and communities, and how they as leaders prioritize their decision-making within this framework. As they are, our data offer a conceptual framework singularly focused on the community-school connection. We were less able to explore other nuances of PCL or to more deeply apply critical PCL as an analytical framework, and we lack confidence to make further inferences about how superintendents negotiate systemic inequities at the state/district level or within local communities themselves. As critical PCL remains woefully under-theorized (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Rey, 2014), this is an area of significant opportunity.

Related to this limitation, we note areas of inquiry and perspectives that our analysis does not consider. First, though many of our superintendent participants involve board members in teacher selection and recruitment, we did not explicitly explore the relationship between superintendents and school boards as it relates to teacher hiring and retention.

The school board is integral to superintendent success and retention (Van Deuren, Evert & Lang, 2016), and as school board members are typically local, how they contribute to and set the tone for these activities remains a research opportunity.

Because our data draw from administrator interviews, they represent only the perspectives of the superintendents or district administrators themselves. We do not know how the communities or teachers perceive these processes, and in-depth case studies to consider the etic and emic (Harris, 1976) perspectives from a variety of stakeholders would further illuminate the nature and impacts of place-conscious hiring and orientation processes.

Beyond the opportunity to include multiple perspectives, our analysis describes supports provided to teachers at the very beginning of their work in a new district and into the first year of their employment, but it did not further explore the discrete and individualized practices that superintendents use to support and retain these teachers beyond their first year. Given that teacher shortages are more linked to teacher retention than production (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010) and the documented value of new teacher supports in reducing teacher turnover, how PCL practices support teachers throughout their careers and community relationships remains an area of research opportunity. Additionally, we did not explore the impacts of these practices. The place-conscious activities we describe are time-intensive and demand significant superintendent responsibility; whether they foster teacher retention or place-based teaching practices in new teacher hires is an important next step for our research.

Our data reflect rural Alaska. Remote-rural conditions of communities accessible only by plane, extreme weather conditions including dark and cold, high rates of teacher and superintendent turnover, and cultural contexts are specific to our state. Our data reflect an extreme case example (Patton, 2002), and these findings may not hold consistent in other rural contexts.

Finally, though we spoke to many superintendents in Alaska, our data do not reflect all locales. The themes in our data suggest an idyllic and harmonious relationship between schools and communities, but we know from history and personal experience that this is not always the case. Following late 1940s-70s era of forced boarding schools (Easley & Kanaqlak, 2005), some Alaska communities experience significant historical trauma (Hirshberg, 2008) and relationships with Western schooling that are strained if not openly hostile (Bates & Oleksa, 2008). Though superintendents discussed how practices differ by community, our methods did not expressly explore these dynamics, and how PCL happens within strained school-community relationships is an area of further research opportunity.

Conclusion

In spite of the positive, caring, community-engaged activities we identified, it is important to note that rural and remote-rural Alaska still experience high teacher turnover. As the superintendents noted, the challenges of recruiting and retaining educators will not change—teachers will want to move closer to their families out of state and to amenities, they will want to purchase homes and build equity (which is often not possible in rural Alaska), and the cold and dark of winter is a constant.⁷ Still, within these contexts, a PCL philosophy can ensure that rural superintendents hire and prepare teachers who will be successful, make meaningful community connections, and serve children and families well. The activities we described are a first step in cultivating teachers' affiliation to their communities, and they offer them a foundation to build relationships and to develop their competence and sensitivities within unconventional teaching conditions. They are intended to enrich their awareness, attitudes, and capacity for a long-term appointment.

We recognize the rural superintendent is not a “one-person show,” and the very nature of PCL is inclusivity and involvement of schools and communities in both defining needs and priorities and in direction-setting around appropriate solutions. Our data evidences this collaboration. Though we do not wish to understate the role of community and other school personnel nor fail to recognize the teacher efforts in establishing these connections personally and in the curriculum, we also recognize that rural superintendents, as leaders, help set the tone for these processes within the school district. Strong, stable superintendents support a district's ability to build and sustain a functioning, community-oriented team. Our article, therefore, both documents sites of possibility (Weis & Fine, 2004) and the challenges inherent in achieving place-based curricula and place-conscious schools in areas of high teacher or administrator turnover. We hope our analysis will inform ongoing conversations that seek to build upon and support opportunities for rural educators and communities.

7 Climate change notwithstanding.

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