

Study examines disadvantages for rural districts at recruiting high-quality teachers

May 8 2014, by George Diepenbrock

(Phys.org) —Rural school districts are at a distinct disadvantage in being able to attract high-quality teachers out of college compared with suburban and urban districts, according to recent study funded by the Spencer Foundation and released online in *The American Review of Public Administration*.

"Our study shows that new [teachers](#) with the strongest credentials—measured by things like ACT scores and scores on state certification exams—are less likely to accept teaching positions in [public schools](#) in remote, rural school districts," said the study's lead author, Jacob Fowles, a University of Kansas assistant professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration. "This finding holds across locales, meaning that the strongest credentialed teachers from remote, [rural areas](#) are much more likely to leave those areas to teach, as compared to a teacher with average credentials."

He said the team also found that in some circumstances the exits may create vacancies that are filled by the weakest credentialed teachers from other areas.

Fowles and the team, which included researchers from the University of Kentucky and Tennessee State University, examined data surrounding 21,537 first-time teachers hired in Kentucky public schools from 1987 to 2005, including the teachers' performance on the ACT and state teaching certification exams as well as how far away a teacher's college institution was from his or her initial teaching job. The study focused on

teacher placement in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, an area that faces lower population density, lower levels of educational attainment and higher concentrations of poverty as compared to the rest of the state.

He said using the mechanism of pay to alleviate quality differences across districts has been historically controversial in most states, and he noted districts in many states are still struggling due to education funding cuts as a result of the recent economic downturn. As such, Fowles hopes to launch a second phase of the project to look closer at strategies rural districts can use to attract and retain quality teachers.

"Our prior work finds little evidence that broader state education reforms have meaningfully induced significant changes in the pre-existing patterns of mobility of teachers across rural and nonrural labor market boundaries," Fowles said.

Accordingly, he said one strategy that makes sense is for districts to receive assistance in developing effective "grow-your-own" strategies that focus on developing and retaining local teachers in conjunction with ongoing efforts to recruit high-quality teachers from elsewhere.

"One option that districts might consider is increasing the effectiveness of in-service training programs," Fowles said. "As online education continues to develop, this introduces the possibility to offer timely, high-quality training to teachers, regardless of location."

He said more Americans live in urban areas than ever before, and there is not a lot of indication that will change.

"But that doesn't mean that the challenges facing children from families that live in rural areas are unimportant or should be ignored," Fowles said. "If we want our system of public education to give every student an equal opportunity to succeed, that needs to include the over twelve

million students in the United States that attend schools in rural areas."

The American Society of Public Administration's journal this fall is expected to publish in print the article "Public Employee Quality in a Geographic Context: A Study of Rural Teachers."

More information: Jacob Fowles, J. S. Butler, Joshua M. Cowen, Megan E. Streams, and Eugenia F. Toma. "Public Employee Quality in a Geographic Context: A Study of Rural Teachers." *The American Review of Public Administration* 0275074012474714, first published on January 27, 2013 [DOI: 10.1177/0275074012474714](https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074012474714)

Provided by University of Kansas

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