

Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities

Boldly Improve Learning Conditions
Eliminate Educator Shortages



Goal: Eliminate the educator shortage for every school by ensuring that schools are appropriately staffed, paying educators competitively, and strengthening pathways into the profession.

This document is part of the “Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities” series, which is intended to highlight areas of strength and opportunities for growth in rural schools as it relates to Raise the Bar focus areas. To learn more about Raise the Bar, visit www.ed.gov/raisethebar.

Introduction

“Raise the Bar: Lead the World” is the U.S. Department of Education’s (Department’s) call to transform public education and ensure all students have the resources needed to reach their full potential. **Boldly Improving Learning Conditions** is a key focus area of Raise the Bar, which calls on the nation to ensure that students are provided with what they need to learn in a healthy and high-quality environment by **eliminating the educator shortage**.

Eliminating the educator shortage is especially urgent for rural schools, which struggle with persistent staffing shortages in both teaching and non-teaching roles. This problem is especially acute in rural schools serving low-income students and students of color, which experience [disproportionately high teacher turnover](#). Rural communities face unique challenges as they work to attract and retain educators but also possess unique qualities that can set them up for success.

The Department is targeting [five key areas for action and investment](#): improving compensation and working conditions, expanding high-quality and affordable pathways into the profession, supporting effective new teacher induction and ongoing professional learning throughout educators’ careers, promoting teacher leadership and career advancement, and increasing educator diversity. In September 2024, the Department announced a new Center on Strengthening and Supporting the Educator Workforce, which will support SEAs and LEAs in advancing these strategies. This brief focuses on two of these key areas for rural schools working to attract and retain effective teachers: **(1) building pathways into the profession for rural teachers** and **(2) improving rural teacher compensation and working conditions**.

Building Pathways for Rural Teachers

Rural school leaders [consistently report](#) struggling to attract qualified applicants to rural teaching jobs. As rural schools work to expand and diversify their applicant pool, they often look to recruit from outside the local community. However, non-local and international recruitment comes with its own set of challenges. Schools often struggle to retain teachers hired from outside of rural communities, who face a steep learning curve in adjusting to rural ways of life and putting down roots in a new community. Responding to these challenges, schools have increasingly focused on building pathways for local students and community members to go into teaching.

States have worked to support pathways for rural teachers through Registered Teacher Apprenticeships, Grow Your Own programs, Rural Teacher Corps-style programs, and strengthening educator preparation program placements in rural schools. In collaboration between the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, Registered Teacher Apprenticeships [have grown](#) to 45 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, as of October 2024, up from zero at the beginning of the Biden-Harris Administration, and several have incorporated an explicit focus on serving the needs of rural schools.



Kansas [is using federal apprenticeship funds](#) to support its [Registered Apprenticeship Program for K-12 teachers](#), with a particular focus on recruiting apprentices who are first generation college students from underserved populations in frontier and rural areas.



Montana [has previously funded Grow Your Own programs across the state](#) specifically designed to support high school students to become rural and reservation school educators, with an emphasis on recruiting new Native educators to serve Native communities. While new funding was not allocated for the program in the most recent legislative session, dual enrollment courses in education established under the program have continued as part of Montana's ongoing educator recruitment and retention efforts.

A number of Department programs can be used to support state, district, and educator preparation program efforts to grow the teacher workforce, including [Title I, Part A](#), [Title II, Part A](#), [Teacher Quality Partnership Grants](#), the [Rural Education Achievement Program \(REAP\)](#), [State Personnel Development Grants](#), [Higher Education Personnel Development Grants](#), [Career and Technical Education State Grants](#), and the [Augustus F. Hawkins Center of Excellence Program](#). For rural and geographically isolated communities serving high proportions of Native students, the Department also supports investments in the [Indian Education Professional Development Grant](#), the [Native Hawaiian Education Program](#), the [Alaska Native Education Program](#), the [Native American Career and Technical Education Program](#), the [Native Hawaiian Career and Technical Education Program](#), and the [Tribally Controlled Postsecondary Career and Technical Institutions Program](#), all of which support relevant activities to support and develop educators. For more information on federal resources that can be used to support these efforts, see [Raise the Bar: Eliminate the Educator Shortage | U.S. Department of Education](#).

Improving Rural Teacher Compensation and Working Conditions

Increasing Compensation

Increasing teacher compensation is foundational to ending educator shortages in rural communities. From 1987-2018, over 60 percent of educators who left rural schools did so because of reported dissatisfaction with working conditions. Of those teachers, 34 percent cited pay and benefits as their primary reason for leaving, according to [nationally representative data](#).

The Department has called for states and districts to increase teacher pay, and [convened states](#) to support these efforts. As of 2023-2024, average teacher salaries have [increased by 9.5 percent](#) since 2021. However, if states are to level the playing field for rural communities that may struggle to recruit and [who often lose out on teachers](#) moving to better-resourced suburban and urban schools, providing additional incentives to teach in rural communities is a potential strategy.



Colorado [provides a \\$10,000 incentive](#) for teacher preparation candidates to complete a year of clinical experience in and subsequently commit to an additional two years teaching in a rural Colorado school.



Other states have had promising results providing direct salary increases to teach in roles with consistent shortages. For example, **Hawaii** historically struggled with a longstanding shortage of special educator roles, and recently cut their chronically high rate of special educator vacancies [nearly in half in a single school year](#) by providing a \$10,000 per year raise for special educators, with additional funds possible for working in the hardest-to-staff schools.

Several Department formula grant programs can be used to support teacher compensation incentives (consistent with specific program requirements), such as [Title I, Part A](#), [Title II, Part A](#), and [REAP](#).

Improving Working Conditions

Raising compensation is critical to the health of the rural teacher workforce. However, research suggests that working conditions are an even larger driver of rural teacher turnover. [The same national data](#) on rural teacher turnover from 1987-2018 found that working conditions—particularly school leadership—were the leading reason rural teachers reported leaving their jobs.



While few states have taken on school climate and leadership with a specifically rural focus, **Colorado** recently launched a state-sponsored [rural principal leadership cohort](#), acknowledging that the role of school leaders in rural communities is unique.

The physical working conditions of schools are also integral to teacher success and retention. A safe, healthy school environment designed to support teaching and learning impacts teachers and students alike. Many rural communities currently [struggle to fund](#) much-needed school facilities upgrades, and these conditions [may impact teachers' physical health, job satisfaction, and intention to stay in their current jobs](#).



To better understand how teachers experience the working conditions of their schools, several states fund and administer statewide surveys on teacher working conditions. **North Carolina** [surveys teachers every other year](#) on topics including teachers' perceptions of school leadership, resources and facilities, and equity, all published at the district and school level.

Schools can utilize a range of federal formula funding, including Title II, Part A, to work to improve teacher working conditions. The Department also administers many discretionary grant programs that can be used to improve teacher working conditions, including [School Climate Transformation Grants](#). Recognizing a critical shortage of Native educators, the Department also launched the [Native American Teacher Retention Initiative \(NATRI\)](#) grant competition in 2023. Through the Department's [School Infrastructure Programs](#),

states are building their capacity to ensure that high-need districts, including those in rural communities, benefit from planning support and best practices in developing public school facilities that are safe, healthy, sustainable, and equitable learning environments. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has created a Working Well Resource Directory, which provides tools for supporting educator and staff well-being. The following resources from the [Regional Educational Laboratory \(REL\) program](#) provide research-based strategies for improving working conditions for rural teachers:

- [REL Northwest Webinar Resources: Improving Rural Teacher Retention: Developing Localized Strategies to Address Teacher Working Conditions](#)
- [REL Northwest Resource on Educator Retention and Turnover in Alaska: 2021 Update](#)
- [REL Southwest Infographic on Indicators of Successful Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Oklahoma Rural Schools](#)

Questions for State and Local Policymakers

State and local policymakers working to remove barriers and increase support for rural communities to eliminate educator shortages can consider the following questions as they develop strategies to advance this work:

- What data does your state collect and publish on your teacher workforce (teacher vacancies, shortage areas, retention rates, workforce diversity, working conditions surveys, exit interview data, etc.)? Is that data analyzed by rurality or region? If so, what patterns are visible?
- Does your state provide targeted incentives to teach in rural communities or in shortage areas?
- Does your state support rural districts to improve teacher working conditions (through mediums like state-level professional development for school leaders, school climate improvement programs, statewide teacher working conditions surveys, etc.)?
- Does your state funding formula equitably fund rural schools, enabling them to provide competitive salaries and benefits?
- Does your state currently support, through policy and/or funding, targeted programs (such as registered apprenticeships or Grow Your Own programs) to attract and train new rural educators?



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