

Beyond Burnout: A Call to Action for Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools

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Abstract

Teacher attrition remains a persistent challenge in rural schools, threatening workforce stability and student success. This paper examines the systemic factors contributing to teacher burnout and turnover in rural education, including workload demands, limited resources, student trauma, compensation disparities, and leadership practices. Drawing on current literature and practitioner reflections from educators who served in multiple public Mississippi middle rural school systems, this paper highlights how structural and environmental conditions shape teacher retention. The analysis emphasizes that rural schools face heightened risk due to geographic isolation, staffing shortages, and community resource constraints. Using surveys and personal reflections, we analyzed teachers and leaders' perceptions of rurality, while examining systematic factors that cause teacher burnout and high percentages of turnover. In our analysis, we found concepts impacting burnout and turnover can be altered with the appropriate resources administered. We conclude this article with recommendations urging educational leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders to implement coordinated strategies that promote teacher well-being, strengthen retention, and sustain rural school systems.

Keywords: teacher attrition, rural education, teacher burnout, workforce retention, school leadership

1. Introduction

In many rural communities, the school is more than a place where students receive their education; it is the heartbeat of the town. It serves as a central gathering space where community members meet to plan for the future, celebrate achievements, and engage in both social and academic events. While national conversations often focus on urban educational challenges, rural districts face distinct and persistent barriers that hinder leaders' ability to sustain consistent student success. Rural school leaders frequently confront issues such as teacher turnover, persistent teacher shortages, substance abuse, gang-related activities, high absenteeism, low morale, diminished expectations, lack of motivation, teacher burnout, and comparatively low salaries. Among these challenges, teacher attrition has emerged as one of the most significant contributors to staffing shortages in rural areas (Nguyen, 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2018). National estimates indicate that teacher attrition rates hover around 16%, resulting in reduced student achievement and substantial financial losses for school districts (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Attrition is particularly prevalent in districts serving communities with high levels of poverty and limited resources (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022; Sutch et al., 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that teacher attrition rates have continued to rise in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying staffing challenges for rural schools (Ruble et al., 2023; Pressley, 2021).

In rural communities, the departure of a single teacher often carries consequences that extend far beyond filling a vacancy. It may result in the loss of an entire department, the cancellation of advanced coursework, or the elimination of extracurricular programs that foster student engagement and school connectedness. Teachers in rural schools frequently assume multiple roles within their communities, serving not only as educators but also as coaches, mentors, and community liaisons who support students and families beyond the classroom (Preston et al., 2013; Showalter et al., 2019).

Scholars have identified a direct relationship between teacher dissatisfaction and increased levels of burnout, both of which significantly contribute to decisions to leave the profession (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021). In addition to emotional and professional strain, teachers in rural schools often experience professional isolation, economic disparities, and limited access to instructional and technological resources, all of which contribute to workforce instability (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Tieken, 2014). These conditions collectively challenge the long-term sustainability of rural school systems and underscore the need for targeted leadership strategies to support educator retention and well-being.

Core Literature Review

To better understand the factors contributing to teacher attrition in rural schools, this paper examines the existing body of literature related to teacher burnout, workplace stress, compensation, leadership, and rural-specific challenges. These interconnected factors provide insight into the systemic conditions that influence teacher retention and workforce stability in rural education settings.

Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

Teacher burnout is a psychosocial syndrome that results from chronic work-related stress and prolonged exposure to emotionally demanding work environments. It is commonly characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Madigan et al., 2023; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion is often identified as the central component of burnout because it reflects the depletion of teachers' emotional and physical resources necessary to effectively perform their professional responsibilities. When teachers experience persistent emotional fatigue, they may struggle to maintain enthusiasm, patience, and engagement in their work, ultimately affecting instructional quality and classroom climate (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Burnout has become increasingly prevalent in the teaching profession due to rising expectations, accountability pressures, and the growing complexity of students' academic and social-emotional needs. Teachers are expected to meet diverse learning needs, implement new instructional strategies, manage classroom behavior, and respond to administrative requirements, often within limited time and resource constraints (Herman et al., 2020). These demands can create a sustained imbalance between job expectations and available support, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. Research suggests that teachers who experience high levels of burnout are more likely to report lower job satisfaction and decreased commitment to their profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

In addition to affecting professional performance, burnout has significant implications for teachers' physical and mental health. Studies have linked teacher burnout to increased absenteeism, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and depression (Herman et al., 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These health-related challenges can disrupt instructional continuity and place additional strain on school systems, particularly in rural districts where substitute teachers and replacement staff may be difficult to secure. Frequent teacher absences can also contribute to inconsistent learning experiences for students and increased workload for remaining staff members.

The consequences of teacher burnout extend beyond individual educators to the overall functioning of schools and districts. High levels of burnout are strongly associated with teacher turnover and attrition, which can result in financial costs, staffing shortages, and reduced student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019). For rural communities, where schools often serve as central institutions, the loss of experienced teachers can have lasting impacts on community stability and educational quality. Understanding burnout as both an individual and organizational challenge is therefore essential for developing comprehensive strategies that promote workforce wellness, improve retention, and support sustainable educational systems.

Stress

Stress is widely recognized as a significant contributing factor to teacher burnout and attrition within the education profession. Teacher stress is typically defined as the experience of negative emotional responses, such as anxiety, frustration, or exhaustion, resulting from aspects of the teaching role that are perceived as threatening or overwhelming (Kyriacou, 2001). Educators are expected to manage instructional responsibilities, administrative requirements, student needs, and accountability measures simultaneously, often within limited time and resource constraints. When these demands exceed teachers' coping capacity, chronic stress can develop, increasing the risk of burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Herman et al., 2020).

Research has consistently shown that prolonged exposure to workplace stress negatively affects teachers' physical and mental health, professional performance, and commitment to the profession. Teachers experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to report fatigue, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion, which can impair their ability to effectively manage classrooms and deliver high-quality instruction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Over time, persistent stress can lead to disengagement from the profession and increased intentions to leave teaching altogether (Madigan & Kim, 2021). These outcomes are particularly concerning in rural school districts, where staffing shortages and limited access to substitute teachers can amplify the impact of teacher stress on school operations.

In addition to workload-related pressures, teachers often face emotional stress associated with supporting students who experience poverty, trauma, or academic challenges. The emotional labor required to address students' social and emotional needs can place significant strain on educators, particularly when they lack adequate support from administrators or mental health professionals (Jennings, 2015). Teachers may also experience stress related to standardized testing requirements, performance evaluations, and public accountability measures, all of which contribute

to increased workplace tension and reduced morale. These stressors can create an environment in which teachers feel undervalued, overwhelmed, and unsupported.

Leadership practices play a critical role in shaping teachers' stress levels and overall workplace experiences. Supportive leadership, clear communication, and access to professional resources can help mitigate the negative effects of stress by fostering a sense of stability and collaboration within schools (Leithwood et al., 2020). Conversely, ineffective leadership and lack of organizational support can intensify stress and contribute to teacher dissatisfaction. Research suggests that schools with strong leadership and positive organizational climates are more likely to retain teachers and maintain consistent instructional quality, highlighting the importance of leadership interventions in reducing workplace stress.

Stress is particularly pronounced in rural school settings, where educators often assume multiple roles and responsibilities due to limited staffing and resources. Teachers in rural districts may serve as instructors, coaches, counselors, and community advocates simultaneously, increasing their workload and emotional demands (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Geographic isolation and limited access to professional networks can further exacerbate stress by reducing opportunities for collaboration and professional support. Addressing teacher stress in rural schools therefore requires targeted strategies that prioritize workforce wellness, leadership support, and sustainable working conditions.

Workload and Lack of Support

Excessive workload and insufficient professional support are widely recognized as major contributors to teacher burnout and attrition. Teachers are increasingly expected to manage instructional responsibilities, administrative tasks, data reporting requirements, and extracurricular duties, often extending their work beyond the traditional school day (Sutcher et al., 2019). These expanding expectations can create significant time pressures that limit opportunities for lesson planning, collaboration, and professional reflection. When teachers perceive their workload as unmanageable, they are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction, both of which are strong predictors of attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

The lack of professional support from administrators and colleagues further intensifies the challenges associated with heavy workloads. Supportive leadership has been consistently identified as a protective factor against burnout, as it provides teachers with guidance, resources, and opportunities for professional growth (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Conversely, teachers who feel unsupported by school leadership may experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and decreased motivation. Research indicates that inadequate support systems can undermine teachers' confidence and contribute to a sense of professional disengagement, increasing the likelihood that they will leave the profession (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Workload challenges are particularly pronounced in rural school districts, where staffing shortages often require teachers to assume multiple roles and responsibilities. In many rural schools, teachers may serve simultaneously as instructors, coaches, advisors, and mentors, placing additional demands on their time and energy (Preston et al., 2013). Limited staffing also means that teachers may have fewer opportunities to share responsibilities or receive assistance from colleagues. These conditions can lead to increased stress, reduced work-life balance, and heightened risk of burnout.

Addressing workload and support challenges requires intentional leadership strategies and organizational structures that prioritize teacher well-being. Providing access to instructional resources, mentoring programs, and collaborative planning time can help reduce workload-related stress and improve job satisfaction (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Schools that foster supportive professional environments are more likely to retain teachers, maintain instructional consistency, and promote positive school outcomes. As teacher shortages continue to affect rural communities, strengthening support systems and managing workload expectations remain critical components of workforce sustainability.

Compensation and Resources

Compensation and access to adequate resources are critical factors influencing teacher recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction, particularly in rural school districts. Rural schools often face financial constraints that limit their ability to offer competitive salaries and benefits compared to urban and suburban districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). These disparities can make it difficult for rural districts to attract and retain qualified educators, contributing to persistent staffing shortages and increased reliance on less experienced or alternatively certified teachers. Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers who perceive their compensation as insufficient are more likely to experience job dissatisfaction and consider leaving the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

In addition to salary considerations, access to instructional resources plays a significant role in shaping teachers' professional experiences and effectiveness. Limited funding in rural districts can result in outdated technology, insufficient classroom materials, and reduced opportunities for professional development (Showalter et al., 2019). Teachers in under-resourced schools may be required to purchase supplies using personal funds or adapt instruction to accommodate resource shortages, which can increase stress and reduce morale. These conditions not only affect teacher well-being but also influence the quality of instruction and student outcomes.

Addressing compensation and resource disparities requires systemic investment and strategic leadership initiatives that prioritize teacher support and workforce stability. Studies have shown that districts that provide competitive salaries, adequate classroom resources, and opportunities for professional growth are more likely to retain teachers and maintain stable learning environments (Sutcher et al., 2019). For rural communities, where schools often serve as central institutions, improving compensation and resource allocation is essential for sustaining educational quality and reducing teacher attrition. Strengthening these structural supports can enhance teacher morale, promote organizational stability, and support long-term student success.

Student Behavior and Trauma

Student behavior and exposure to trauma have become increasingly significant factors influencing teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. Many educators work with students who experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including poverty, family instability, violence, and community stressors, all of which can affect behavior, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (Jennings, 2015; Herman et al., 2020). Teachers are often required to manage disruptive behaviors, provide emotional support, and maintain instructional rigor simultaneously, creating complex classroom environments that demand both instructional expertise and emotional resilience. These responsibilities can increase workplace stress and contribute to emotional exhaustion, particularly when teachers lack adequate training or support to address students' social and emotional needs.

Exposure to student trauma can also lead to secondary traumatic stress among educators, a condition that occurs when individuals experience emotional strain from supporting others who have experienced trauma (Jennings, 2015). Teachers who frequently interact with students facing significant emotional or behavioral challenges may experience feelings of helplessness, frustration, and fatigue. Over time, this emotional burden can contribute to burnout and reduced professional satisfaction. Research suggests that teachers working in high-poverty schools are more likely to encounter trauma-related student behaviors, increasing the risk of stress-related health concerns and job dissatisfaction (Herman et al., 2020). These conditions can ultimately influence teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Student behavior challenges can also disrupt instructional time and reduce opportunities for effective teaching and learning. Frequent disciplinary incidents, classroom interruptions, and behavioral conflicts require teachers to devote significant time to classroom management, often at the expense of academic instruction (Collie et al., 2012). When teachers perceive that they are unable to maintain a safe and productive learning environment, they may experience decreased professional efficacy and increased frustration. This sense of diminished effectiveness is a key component of burnout and has been linked to higher rates of teacher attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Addressing the impact of student behavior and trauma requires comprehensive support systems that prioritize both students and teacher's well-being. Schools that implement trauma-informed practices, provide access to mental health resources, and offer professional development focused on behavior management and emotional support strategies have demonstrated improvements in teacher satisfaction and retention (Herman et al., 2020). Leadership plays a critical role in establishing supportive environments where teachers feel equipped to respond to student needs without compromising their own well-being. For rural schools, where access to mental health services and behavioral specialists may be limited, strengthening internal support systems is essential for sustaining teacher resilience and workforce stability.

Leadership and School Climate

Leadership and school climate are widely recognized as critical factors influencing teacher satisfaction, retention, and overall school effectiveness. School leaders play a central role in shaping organizational culture, establishing expectations, and creating environments that support both teacher and student success. Research has consistently demonstrated that supportive leadership practices, including clear communication, shared decision-making, and recognition of teacher contributions, contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Leithwood et al., 2020). When teachers perceive their leaders as responsive and supportive, they are more likely to feel valued and motivated to remain in their positions.

School climate refers to the collective perceptions of safety, relationships, collaboration, and professional support within a school environment. Positive school climates are characterized by trust among staff members, strong professional relationships, and a shared commitment to student success (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers working in schools with positive climates are more likely to experience lower levels of stress and burnout, as well as higher levels of professional efficacy and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Conversely, negative school climates marked by poor communication, inconsistent leadership, or lack of collaboration can contribute to workplace dissatisfaction and increased turnover.

Effective leadership also plays a significant role in mitigating the effects of stress and burnout by providing teachers with access to resources, professional development opportunities, and emotional support. Leaders who prioritize teacher well-being and create structures for collaboration can reduce feelings of isolation and improve overall morale (Ingersoll et al., 2018). For example, mentoring programs, regular feedback, and opportunities for professional growth have been shown

to strengthen teacher engagement and retention. These leadership practices are particularly important in rural schools, where staffing shortages and geographic isolation can increase the demands placed on educators.

In rural communities, school leaders often serve as both instructional leaders and community advocates, requiring them to balance administrative responsibilities with community engagement and relationship-building. Limited resources and staffing constraints can make leadership roles more complex and demanding, yet strong leadership remains one of the most influential factors in sustaining teacher retention and organizational stability (Preston et al., 2013). Developing leadership capacity and fostering positive school climates are therefore essential strategies for addressing teacher attrition and promoting long-term workforce wellness in rural education systems.

Rural-Specific Challenges

Rural schools face a unique set of structural and environmental challenges that distinguish them from their urban and suburban counterparts. Geographic isolation, declining population trends, and limited economic resources often create barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified educators in rural districts (Showalter et al., 2019). These challenges are compounded by smaller tax bases and reduced funding streams, which can limit districts' ability to offer competitive salaries, maintain facilities, and provide access to instructional resources. As a result, rural schools frequently operate with fewer personnel and limited support services, placing additional demands on teachers and administrators.

Teacher recruitment and retention remain persistent concerns in rural education systems. Rural districts often struggle to attract educators due to limited professional opportunities, geographic distance from urban centers, and fewer amenities compared to metropolitan areas (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Once hired, teachers may face challenges related to professional isolation, limited mentorship opportunities, and restricted access to specialized professional development. These conditions can contribute to feelings of disconnection and reduced job satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of teacher turnover and attrition. Research has shown that rural schools experience higher vacancy rates and greater difficulty filling positions in critical subject areas such as mathematics, science, and special education (Sutcher et al., 2019).

In addition to staffing challenges, rural educators often assume multiple roles within their schools and communities. Teachers in rural districts may serve simultaneously as instructors, coaches, advisors, mentors, and community leaders, requiring them to manage diverse responsibilities beyond their primary teaching duties (Preston et al., 2013). While these roles can strengthen relationships between schools and communities, they can also increase workload demands and contribute to stress and burnout. The expectation that teachers will fulfill multiple responsibilities without adequate support or compensation can create unsustainable working conditions and reduce long-term retention.

Community context also plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of rural educators. Many rural communities face economic hardship, limited access to healthcare and mental health services, and higher rates of poverty, all of which can influence student needs and school operations (Tieken, 2014). Teachers working in these environments may encounter additional challenges related to student trauma, family instability, and resource scarcity. These factors can intensify emotional labor and increase the risk of burnout, particularly when teachers lack access to external support services.

Addressing rural-specific challenges requires targeted policies and leadership strategies that recognize the unique needs of rural communities. Investments in teacher preparation programs, financial incentives, housing assistance, and professional support networks have been identified as effective strategies for improving recruitment and retention in rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019). Strengthening partnerships between schools, community organizations, and local governments can also enhance resource availability and support sustainable educational systems. For rural districts seeking to reduce teacher attrition, prioritizing workforce wellness, leadership development, and community engagement remains essential for long-term organizational stability and student success.

Why Rural Schools Are at Greater Risk

Rural schools are at greater risk of experiencing teacher burnout and attrition due to the convergence of structural, economic, and geographic factors that create persistent workforce instability. Unlike urban and suburban districts, rural schools often operate with limited financial resources, smaller staffing pools, and fewer support services, increasing the burden placed on individual educators (Showalter et al., 2019). These systemic constraints can result in heavier workloads, reduced access to instructional materials, and fewer opportunities for professional collaboration. When teachers are required to manage multiple responsibilities without adequate support, the likelihood of stress, burnout, and eventual attrition increases significantly (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Geographic isolation further contributes to the vulnerability of rural schools by limiting access to professional development, mentorship, and specialized services. Teachers in rural districts may have fewer opportunities to engage in professional learning communities or receive instructional coaching, which can hinder professional growth and increase feelings of isolation (Azano & Stewart, 2016). In addition, rural schools often face challenges of recruiting substitute teachers, counselors, and mental health professionals, placing additional responsibilities on classroom teachers. This lack

of professional infrastructure can create an environment where educators feel unsupported, overwhelmed, and more likely to leave the profession.

Economic disparities within rural communities also increase the risk of teacher attrition and workforce instability. Many rural districts serve communities experiencing poverty, declining population growth, and limited employment opportunities, all of which can affect school funding and resource availability (Tieken, 2014). These economic conditions can lead to lower teacher salaries, reduced benefits, and fewer incentives for long-term employment in rural schools. Research has consistently shown that compensation disparities and limited resources are significant predictors of teacher turnover, particularly in high-need districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). As financial pressures intensify, rural districts may struggle to maintain stable staffing levels and sustain educational programs.

Another factor contributing to the heightened risk faced by rural schools is the interconnected nature of school and community relationships. In many rural communities, schools serve as central institutions that support not only academic learning but also social services, extracurricular programs, and community engagement. When teacher attrition occurs, the impact extends beyond the classroom to the broader community, disrupting relationships and reducing continuity for students and families (Preston et al., 2013). The loss of even a single teacher can significantly affect program availability, student engagement, and community stability. Consequently, rural schools are particularly vulnerable to workforce disruptions, making targeted retention strategies and leadership interventions essential for sustaining educational quality and organizational resilience.

2. Methods

Context of Study

This study represents our effort to understand teachers and leaders' perceptions of factors that contribute to teacher burnout and turnover and the needed methods that might better these Mississippi public middle rural schools' outcomes. We have three questions regarding this inquiry. First, what causes rural middle school teachers to become burned out? Second, what causes high teacher turnover in middle rural schools? Third, what actions by local and state stakeholders can mitigate some of the identified challenges? We hope by understanding teachers and leaders' perceptions, we can influence other educators and community stakeholders to make decisions that can improve the performance of Mississippi public rural middle schools that encounter high percentages of teacher burnout and turnover.

Participants

We conducted this study using personal, teachers, and leaders' perspectives who worked in several rural middle public schools in Mississippi. Our experiences contributed to our interest in conducting this research relating to teacher burnout and turnover. We observed and experienced teacher burnout and teacher leaving the profession at a rapid pace. We recruited a purposeful sample of Mississippi rural middle school teachers and leaders who encountered personal burnout or were responsible for conferencing with teachers who faced burnout or left the profession or school because of the many challenges. There were 5 participants including two leaders and three teachers. These educators all had at least three years of experience in a rural middle school. They were selected based on our prior relationship and solicited by email inquiry. Each participant gave their consent via email to participate in the study. We informed participants that names would not be used within during the reporting of findings since our overall goal is to discuss teacher's attrition, burnout, and actional steps needed to improve current ineffective practices.

Table 1. Participants

	Years of Experiences	Position	Gender
Teacher 1	8	Secondary math	Male
Teacher 2	10	Secondary science	Female
Teacher 3	7	Secondary ELA	Female
Leader 1	19	Principal	Female
Leader 2	16	Assistant principal	Male

3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach, with a focus on teacher attrition and teacher burnout. Each participant answered ten questions relating to key causes of teacher burnout and attrition. Data were initially grouped into descriptive codes that included similar causes. After an author's discussion, codes were regrouped into themes. The themes that developed were physical and emotional exhaustion, teachers' absenteeism, student trauma, poverty, compensation, and financial stability.

4. Results

The data revealed some common themes amongst surveyed educators. This section explores each challenge, providing in-depth information to support the educators' perspectives and steps needed to overcome decades of barriers that exist within Mississippi rural public schools leading to teachers' attrition and burnout. Participants are identified throughout each theme as either a teacher or a leader.

Practitioner Reflections on Teacher Attrition

While the literature highlights systemic contributors to teacher's attrition, lived experiences provide critical insight into how these challenges manifest in daily school operations. Within this section of the paper, we present our personal, teachers', and leaders' reflections seeking to better understand the realities of teacher attrition in schools. The two authors of this paper, alongside participants in this study, worked across several different rural Mississippi middle school systems, providing us with diverse professional experiences and perspectives. Both authors served as classroom educators, while Author One also served in the capacity of an administrator. These varied roles allowed us to observe teacher attrition from multiple vantage points, including classroom instruction, school leadership, and staff support. Despite differences in context and location, we consistently encountered many of the same challenges identified in the literature as contributors to teacher burnout and attrition. Research has shown that teacher turnover is often influenced by working conditions, workload demands, and organizational support, rather than solely individual motivation or commitment (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2018). From the participating teachers' and leaders' perspectives, there are several factors that cause teacher attrition that can easily be resolved with the appropriate leadership in place.

Physical and emotional exhaustion

One recurring theme identified by participants was physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by teachers who were routinely overworked. Teachers were frequently required to cover additional classes when colleagues were absent, supervise students during their planning periods, or assume responsibilities outside their assigned roles. In some cases, staffing shortages resulted in teachers losing valuable preparation time, which increased stress and reduced opportunities for instructional planning. These experiences align with research indicating that excessive workload and lack of protected planning time are significant predictors of teacher burnout and job dissatisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Sutch et al., 2019). When teachers consistently operate in survival mode, the sustainability of the profession becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

Teacher absenteeism and mid-year resignations

Another theme developed included teacher absenteeism and mid-year resignations, which participating leaders recalled as frequently occurring events that caused the hiring of long-term substitute teachers for extended periods. During these times, remaining staff members were required to work collaboratively to ensure that students continued receiving instruction and support. While educators demonstrated resilience and dedication, the constant need to compensate for staffing shortages created an environment of chronic stress and uncertainty. Research suggests that high turnover rates disrupt instructional continuity, increase workload demands for remaining staff, and contribute to declining morale within schools (Ingersoll et al., 2018). These conditions can create a cycle in which burnout leads to attrition, and attrition further intensifies burnout among those who remain.

Student trauma and poverty

Another significant theme identified was the impact of student trauma and poverty on both students and educators. Throughout the teachers and leaders' experiences, they encountered students who faced neglect, food insecurity, and unstable home environments. There were instances in which students reported not seeing their parents for several days or arriving at school without having eaten. Situations such as these require teachers to respond not only as educators but also as caregivers, advocates, and emotional support. The emotional labor associated with supporting students experiencing trauma can place a significant burden on teachers and contribute to secondary traumatic stress and burnout (Jennings, 2015; Herman et al., 2020). These realities highlight the complex and demanding nature of teaching in high-need communities, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Compensation and financial stability

Compensation and financial stability are an additional theme identified as teachers identify Mississippi as one of the states with the lowest salaries. Teachers also expressed frustration with salaries that do not reflect the demands of the profession or the cost of living. Many educators questioned whether the emotional and physical toll of teaching was worth the financial sacrifice required to remain in the field. Research has consistently identified inadequate compensation as a major factor influencing teacher attrition, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts where resources are limited (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). When educators feel undervalued financially and professionally, their commitment to the profession may weaken over time.

Collectively, these experiences illustrate how workload demands, student trauma, staffing shortages, and compensation challenges intersect to influence teacher attrition. Our reflections as educators reinforce the findings of existing research and underscore the urgency of addressing the systemic conditions that contribute to workforce instability. Teacher attrition is not the result of individual failure or lack of dedication; rather, it is often the outcome of sustained exposure to challenging working conditions without adequate support. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for developing policies and leadership practices that promote teacher well-being, strengthen retention, and ensure that schools remain in stable learning environments for students.

Call to Action

The evidence presented throughout this review and the lived experiences of educators highlight the urgent need for coordinated and intentional action to address teacher attrition in rural schools. Given the persistent challenges outlined throughout the literature and practitioner experiences, intentional and coordinated action is required to address the root causes of teacher attrition in rural schools. Teacher's attrition in rural communities is not simply a staffing concern; it is a systemic challenge that threatens the stability of educational systems and the well-being of the communities they serve. Mississippi rural public schools often function as the social and cultural centers of their communities, and when educators leave the profession, the consequences extend beyond the classroom to families, local economies, and community identity. The evidence presented throughout this paper demonstrates that teacher burnout, stress, inadequate compensation, limited resources, and challenging working conditions collectively contribute to workforce instability in rural education settings (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges requires urgency, collaboration, and sustained commitment from educational leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders.

Educational leaders must take deliberate steps to prioritize teacher's well-being as a core component of organizational success rather than an individual responsibility. Supporting educators requires more than temporary solutions or isolated initiatives; it demands comprehensive systems that address workload management, professional support, and access to mental health resources. Research indicates that schools that invest in supportive leadership practices, collaborative professional cultures, and teacher wellness initiatives experience higher levels of retention and improved school climate (Leithwood et al., 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Leaders must therefore shift from reactive responses to proactive strategies that recognize teacher wellness as essential to long-term school improvement and student success.

Policymakers and district leaders also play a critical role in reducing teacher attrition in rural schools by addressing structural inequities that limit access to resources and competitive compensation. Investments in rural education funding, housing incentives, loan forgiveness programs, and professional development opportunities can significantly improve recruitment and retention outcomes (Sutcher et al., 2019). Without intentional policy interventions, rural districts will continue to face persistent staffing shortages that compromise instructional quality and student outcomes. Sustainable funding and targeted workforce initiatives are necessary to ensure that rural schools remain in viable and effective learning environments.

Communities must also be engaged as active partners in supporting educators and strengthening rural school systems. Collaborative partnerships among schools, families, local businesses, and community organizations can create networks of support that reduce isolation and improve morale among educators. When communities recognize the value of teachers and invest in their success, schools become more resilient and better equipped to meet the needs of students. Strengthening community engagement fosters a shared responsibility for educational success and reinforces the importance of retaining qualified educators in rural schools.

The time for incremental change has passed. Rural schools require intentional, coordinated, and sustained action to address the systemic conditions contributing to teacher burnout and attrition. Leaders must prioritize workforce wellness, allocate resources strategically, and implement policies that support educator retention and professional growth. By committing to these actions, educational systems can create stable learning environments, strengthen community relationships, and ensure that rural schools continue to serve as pillars of opportunity for future generations.

5. Conclusion

Sustaining the rural teaching workforce will require long-term commitment, strategic leadership, and systemic investment. Retaining teachers in rural communities demands more than slogans, temporary incentives, or short-term solutions. It requires a fundamental shift in how rural education systems value, support, and sustain the professionals who serve their students and communities. Policymakers and educational leaders must move beyond surface-level responses and intentionally address the root causes of teacher burnout, including excessive workloads, limited resources, professional isolation, and inadequate support structures (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019). Sustainable progress will occur only when teacher's well-being is recognized as essential to organizational effectiveness rather than an optional initiative.

Teacher retention is a shared responsibility that extends beyond the school building. Empowering community members, strengthening partnerships, and implementing evidence-based support systems can reduce workload burdens, expand

professional development opportunities, and equip leaders with the skills necessary to support teachers effectively (Leithwood et al., 2020). Investments in leadership development, mentoring programs, and collaborative professional cultures can foster environments where educators feel valued, supported, and motivated to remain in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Equally important is a sustained commitment to educational equity. Students should not be disadvantaged or defined by their geographic location or zip code. Rural students deserve access to high-quality instruction, stable learning environments, and educators who are prepared to meet their needs (Tieken, 2014).

There are both traditional and innovative practices that can strengthen teacher retention and support the sustainability of rural school systems. Strategies such as virtual co-teaching models, structured mentoring programs for early-career teachers, four-day school schedules, childcare support for educators, student loan forgiveness initiatives, and intentional onboarding and induction programs have demonstrated promise in supporting teacher well-being and workforce stability (Showalter et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Access to modern technology and professional support networks can also reduce professional isolation and enhance instructional effectiveness in rural schools (Azano & Stewart, 2016). While no single strategy will eliminate teacher attrition, a coordinated and systemic approach that integrates multiple supports can create more sustainable working conditions for educators.

Ultimately, the future of rural education depends on the willingness of leaders to act with urgency, intentionality, and courage. The conversation must move beyond acknowledging burnout toward implementing systemic solutions that promote resilience, retention, and long-term success. Rural schools are more than institutions of learning. They are anchors of their communities and gateways to opportunity for future generations. Ensuring that teachers remain in rural classrooms is not simply an operational priority. It is a moral, educational, and community responsibility that will shape the future sustainability of rural schools and the communities they serve.

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Author contributions

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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