

A Case Study Exploration of a Rural High School Principal on Teacher Retention

By

Cristy L. Simpson

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2025

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Kevin Krahenbuhl, Chair

Dr. John Lando Carter

Dr. Leslie Trail

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many people.

First, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my chair, Dr. Krahenbuhl, for your time, expertise, and steadfast guidance throughout this process. Your thoughtful feedback consistently pushed me to dig deeper, refine my thinking, and go further in my research than I thought possible. I am equally grateful to Dr. Carter and Dr. Trail for serving on my committee. Your time, insights, and encouragement strengthened my work in ways I will always appreciate.

I would also like to acknowledge the professors and colleagues in my cohort at MTSU. Your continuous encouragement, collaboration, and shared commitment to growth created a supportive environment that made this journey both memorable and worthwhile. The lessons I have learned alongside you will continue to shape my work as an educator and researcher.

To my family and friends, I owe a debt of gratitude that words cannot fully express. Your unwavering support, patience, and encouragement carried me through the most challenging stages of this process. Thank you for believing in me, for reminding me of my goals when the road felt long, and for celebrating each milestone along the way.

To my students, both past and present, thank you for inspiring me daily. Your curiosity, resilience, and determination to learn have been the driving force behind my work. Each of you has reminded me why education matters and why research that supports teachers and schools is

so vital. This dissertation is dedicated in part to you, for you are the reason I continue to strive to be a better educator and advocate.

Finally, to the educators and school leaders who inspire this work, thank you for the dedication you bring to students and communities every day. This dissertation is, in many ways, a reflection of your commitment and passion.

ABSTRACT

“Across the nation, teacher shortages are receiving broad attention” (Collins & Schaaf, 2020, p.4). Middle Tennessee schools are not exempt from the teacher shortage. Teacher shortages can have various negative consequences for schools and students including ineffective or inexperienced teachers. Secondary teachers are incredibly difficult to retain. Retaining teachers in smaller districts can be even more difficult. What are the beliefs of a principal in a rural, high-retention school regarding why teachers stay?

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teacher retention in a rural high school in Middle Tennessee, with a focus on the perceptions of the principal and eight teachers regarding the factors and leadership practices that encourage long-term commitment. Semi-structured interviews with the principal and questionnaires with teachers revealed four central themes: proximity and community ties, positive school climate and collegial relationships, supportive and approachable leadership, and teacher voice and recognition. These findings extend prior research by illustrating how relational and organizational conditions, rather than financial incentives alone, sustain rural teacher retention.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF TERMS/ABBREVIATIONS	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	
Overview	1
Study Context	2
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Significance of the Study	6
Research Plan	7
Research Questions	7
Conclusion	8
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
Teacher Turnover	10
School Culture and Climate	15
Leadership	17
Leadership and Teacher Retention	21
Summary	23
CHAPTER III: METHOD	
Research Purpose and Questions	25
Conceptual Framework	26

Subjectivity / Positionality Statement	27
Viewpoint of the Study	29
Research Design.....	30
Research Site	31
Participant Selection.....	32
Data Collection.....	41
Data Analysis	43
Trustworthiness and Rigor	44
Summary	46
 CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS	
Introduction	47
Principal Interview Data Analysis.....	48
Teacher Interview Data Analysis	57
Integrated Findings in Relation to the Research Questions	62
Research Question 1	62
Research Question 2	65
Research Question 3	68
Synthesis Across Questions	71
Conclusion.....	73
 CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	
Introduction	76
Interpretation of Findings.....	77

Community and Place.....	77
Leadership and Climate.....	78
Teacher Voice and Recognition	78
Professional Belonging and Collegiality	79
Connection of Emerging Themes to Existing Literature	79
Community and Place.....	80
Leadership and Climate.....	80
Teacher Voice and Recognition	81
Professional Belonging and Collegiality	81
Implications for Practice	82
Implications for Policy.....	89
Recommendations for Further Research	93
Limitations of the Study.....	96
Conclusion.....	97
REFERENCES	99
APPENDICES	109

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework	26
Figure 2. Clustered Mind Map of Overlapping Retention Themes	55
Figure 3. Overlap of Principal and Teacher Perspectives on Teacher Retention	73

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. School vs. state demographics	3
Table 2. Culture vs. climate	16
Table 3. Research participants demographics.....	33
Table 4. Initial codes to research questions	49
Table 5. Condensed principal coding with four super themes	56
Table 6. Condensed coding of teacher interviews into themes	57
Table 7. Condensed Coding for RQ1	63
Table 8. Condensed Coding for Research Question 2	66
Table 9. Condensed Coding for Research Question 3	69
Table 10. Integrated Findings Aligned to Research Questions.....	71
Table 11. Connection of Emerging Themes to Existing Literature	82
Table 12. Implications for Practice.....	88
Table 13. Implications for Policy.....	92

LIST OF TERMS/ABBREVIATIONS

Teacher Turnover- “teachers exiting their current school” (Nguyen et al., 2020)

Culture- “a set of living relationships working toward a shared goal” (Coyle, 2018, p.xviii).

Climate- “one of the influential factors that explain learners’ learning achievement and development, teacher commitment to stay, and school success” (Ontong, 2022)

Leadership- “the ability to take a ‘followership’ to a place they have never been and are not sure they want to go” (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011)

Teacher Retention- the decision of a teacher to remain in the same school year after year

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Teacher retention remains a critical challenge in U.S. education, particularly in rural schools where geographic isolation, fewer resources, and financial disparities intensify staffing pressures (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Recent reports from the media and policy sources indicate a widespread shortage of teachers across various regions of the country (e.g., Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association, 2021; Hall, 2021; Illinois State Board of Education, 2021; Learning Policy Institute, 2019), with particular shortages in high-demand subject areas and in locations that are difficult to staff (Aragon, 2016; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2020, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2022, p. 2). There is a substantial reduction in teacher prep program enrollment, more teachers considering career changes, and teachers considering retirement sooner than later (Lachlan et al., 2020). Since the COVID pandemic, the teaching profession has become increasingly more scrutinized in the media and public opinion, and the continuous increase in expectations of teachers has led to a shortage nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Teachers in the South tend to have higher rates of turnover than other areas in the nation (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Rural schools often face distinct organizational and community-based challenges that exacerbate turnover, including geographic isolation, limited resources, and fewer professional growth opportunities (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Seelig, 2021). Due to shortages, many school systems have had to look for alternative methods to staff their schools, and these alternative methods can lead to a large quantity of potentially unprepared teachers in the classrooms (Ingersoll, 1999; Lachlan et al,

2020). “The quality of teachers and teaching is undoubtedly one of the most important factors shaping the learning and growth of students” (Ingersoll, 1999, p.26).

Teacher shortages have emerged as a critical issue in education, yet these shortages manifest uniquely in rural contexts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), nearly one-third of U.S. public schools are in rural areas, serving more than 9 million students. In Tennessee alone, over 300,000 students attend rural districts, with one-third of the state’s teaching workforce employed in these communities (Showalter et al., 2019). Despite their prevalence, rural schools face persistent challenges in staffing, particularly in high-need areas such as mathematics, science, and special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). These statistics underscore the urgent need to examine retention dynamics within rural schools.

With so many factors negatively impacting teacher retention, it seems plausible that a principal in a hard-to-staff area might offer insight into methods to retain teachers. The research shows that secondary schools are harder to staff than primary schools (Irwin et al, 2023; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). The current education system must find a way to retain qualified secondary teachers. After considering all this information, a principal in a rural Tennessee high school with higher-than-average teacher retention rates could offer perspective on retaining experienced teachers.

Study Context

The study occurred in a rural, middle Tennessee high school. The school was selected based on a data analysis from the Tennessee State Board of Education on teacher retention, and the school had higher-than-average teacher retention and teacher population as compared with other high schools in the state. Table 1 shows a rural high school’s data along with the average

data across the state of Tennessee. Two hundred and two public high schools fit the guidelines of ninth through twelfth grade, public high schools.

Table 1. School vs. State Demographics

System	Average Student Population	Average Teacher Population	Average Teacher Retention
Rural High School A	2000	110	81.3%
TN Public 9-12 th grade High Schools	962	57	80.05%

The principal and selected teachers from the high school were interviewed and/or completed questionnaires to gather data on teacher retention and principal perceptions. While the principal's perceptions provide insight into leadership actions, teacher perspectives are equally important in understanding how those actions are received and whether they influence retention decisions. This study intentionally gathered teacher voices to complement the principal's perspective, providing a more holistic picture of teacher retention. Exploring both the principal's and teachers' perspectives is essential, as prior research highlights that supportive leadership behaviors—such as trust-building, visibility, and fostering collaboration—are strongly associated with retention in rural contexts (Frahm, 2020; Barnes, 2013).

The present investigation employed a qualitative intrinsic case study design, selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth understanding of a bounded case within its specific context. Lucas, Fleming, and Bhosale (2018) define an intrinsic case study as one in which the primary aim is to fundamentally understand the case itself, rather than to generalize findings to broader populations. Within this study, the case was a rural high school in Tennessee with higher-than-average teacher retention. Data were collected from the school principal and veteran teachers

through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and open-ended questionnaires, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives on the factors that sustain teacher retention in rural contexts.

Data analysis was guided by a constructivist epistemological lens, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning through lived experiences and interactions (Bhattacharya, 2017). This orientation allowed the researcher to interpret participants' accounts in ways that foreground the subjective meanings they assign to leadership practices, school climate, and community ties. Although the study was primarily intrinsic, aspects of an instrumental case study were also incorporated, in that the inquiry sought to extend understanding of how principal leadership influences teacher persistence in rural schools more broadly. In this manner, the study illuminates both the unique dynamics of the focal case and the broader implications for rural teacher retention.

Statement of the Problem

Teacher retention is a big part of maintaining the education system. Williams et al. (2002) write, "During the global pandemic a spotlight has shone on the important role of the classroom teacher, and teacher shortages have continued to become more prevalent and widespread" (p. 91). Williams et al. (2022) also suggest that the challenges of managing educator turnover and the lack of applicants may not be distributed equally among different demographics or geographic areas. Rural schools frequently struggle to retain teachers. Oyen and Schweinle (2020) report that teachers in rural areas are often compensated at lower rates, subject to higher workload demands, and at risk of potential geographic and social isolation. In addition, a study

of teacher turnover in various states found that the cost of teacher turnover ranges from approximately \$4,300 to \$17,800 per teacher leaving each year (Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer 2007). In bigger districts like Chicago Public Schools, the loss is estimated at around \$86 million per year (Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer 2007). In a 2024 study, Lochmiller et al. found that school leaders play a large part in the environment and culture of their schools, which can impact teacher retention; furthermore, the specific actions the leaders take are often more school-centered, making it difficult to pinpoint a specific plan for leaders to follow. School leaders' perceptions of why teachers choose to stay in a particular school from year to year and the role the school leader believes they play in teacher retention are important for student achievement and overall school success. Retention of qualified teachers remains a pressing issue, particularly in rural schools where geographic isolation, limited resources, and constrained professional opportunities can intensify turnover challenges (Tran & Dou, 2019). The problem addressed in this study was not recruitment but the retention of teachers in rural contexts, with a focus on identifying the factors that contribute to teachers' commitment to remain.

Purpose of Study

School leaders make an impact on students and teachers within their schools. For schools to be successful and provide the best outcomes for students, school leaders need to be able to retain strong teachers and build a culture that supports their staff. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher retention in a high-retention rural high school by examining the principal's perspectives on the factors influencing teachers' decisions to stay, complemented by teachers' perspectives on the principal's actions and beliefs. This dual perspective allowed for a comprehensive

understanding of the relational, cultural, and leadership conditions that sustain teacher retention in rural schools.

Significance of Study

Successful schools need qualified and effective teachers; principals are responsible for retaining strong teachers. As teacher shortages continue to grow, principals must consider their role in teachers' decisions to stay in schools. This research will delve into the role the principal of a rural high school has in teacher retention. It assumes that principals can influence retention within their schools based on how they perceive their role in the process, while also recognizing the importance of teacher perspectives in confirming or challenging those beliefs. By focusing on a rural high school, this research acknowledges the importance of context. Rural settings bring unique motivators and challenges, such as community attachment, local culture, and teacher self-efficacy, which interact with leadership practices to influence teacher decisions to stay (Boone, 2018; Vincent, 2018). Incorporating both the rural principal's views and teachers' perspectives will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher retention is sustained in these environments. Rural schools often serve as the central hub of their communities, meaning teacher turnover disrupts not only classrooms but also local identity and stability (Preston & Barnes, 2017). By focusing on a high-retention rural school, this study provides insight into how schools with strong community ties sustain teacher commitment despite systemic challenges.

Research Plan

The research plan is to explore the role of a school leader in teacher retention within a rural high school. The research begins with a review of teacher retention data from the State of Tennessee Teacher Retention Report. The report is narrowed down to high schools with higher-than-average teacher retention rates. After identifying the schools, the search was narrowed to rural high schools. Once a school has been identified, the principal was contacted for an interview. The principal was interviewed next. Then, interviews were conducted and questionnaires were sent out to a variety of teachers and staff within the building with 5 or more years at the school about their ideas on retention and the role of the principal. The researcher recorded interviews to identify common themes. The interview transcripts were examined during the coding process to find connections. By collecting data from both the principal and veteran teachers, the study aimed to triangulate perspectives. Teacher insights were used not only to identify retention factors but also to validate, challenge, or expand upon the principal's stated actions and beliefs.

Research Questions

The following three research questions served as the guide for this study:

1. In a rural high school with high teacher retention, what factors does the principal believe contribute to teachers staying at the school?
2. In a rural high school with high teacher retention, how does the faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention?
3. In what ways does the principal encourage teacher retention at this rural high school?

Conclusion

Rural principals are an integral part of the education process. They are responsible for the overall effectiveness of their schools, and a major part of that effectiveness comes from sustaining a strong and stable faculty. Principals play a central role in shaping the conditions that influence whether teachers choose to remain, while teacher perspectives provide essential insight into how those leadership actions are experienced and valued. Understanding both the rural principal's beliefs and the teachers' perspectives offers a more complete picture of the dynamics that support teacher retention.

The following chapters discuss the background research necessary to understand this study, the methodology used, the findings, limitations, and potential for further study. Chapter 2 defines teacher turnover and retention, delves into culture and climate within schools, and discusses the role of rural principals and their impact on teacher retention. Chapter 3 reviews the methods used for research, including study design, selection of participants and study site, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness and rigor, and a timeline for the work. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 5 provides a final discussion and conclusions, as well as the possibility of future studies.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Chapter II presents a review of existing literature to establish the foundation for the problem explored in this study and to guide the study's design. The review begins by examining teacher shortages and turnover, followed by an exploration of school culture, climate, and leadership, and concludes by connecting these themes to teacher retention in rural schools.

Across the United States, the education sector faces growing pressure to secure enough qualified teachers, with rural regions experiencing some of the most persistent challenges (Beck et al., 2020). Teacher shortages are commonly defined as “the inability to fill vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in the fields needed” (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 2). The scope of this shortage is difficult to measure due to inconsistent reporting methods across states (Nguyen, 2022). Nationally, teacher attrition has increased steadily since the 1990s, rising from below six percent to approximately eight percent, with only one-third of attrition linked to retirement (Sutcher et al., 2016). Instead, teachers increasingly cite dissatisfaction with working conditions, including stress, insufficient training, and lack of resources, as primary reasons for leaving (Beck et al., 2020).

For rural schools, these challenges are often compounded by limited resources, geographic isolation, and difficulties in providing competitive salaries or professional development opportunities. At the same time, research highlights the importance of strong school leadership and positive school culture in retaining teachers, with teacher perspectives offering crucial insight into how leadership actions are received. This literature review will situate the

study within these themes by emphasizing how both the beliefs of rural principals and the perspectives of teachers shape the factors that contribute to retention.

Teacher Turnover

As early as the 1980s, reports began to draw national attention to the looming issue of significant teacher shortages in public schools (Ingersoll, 2001). The reports argued that these shortages would lead many school systems to lower hiring standards, resulting in a higher number of underqualified teachers and, ultimately, poorer school performance. While the perceived causes of teacher turnover may seem vast, Nguyen (2020) indicated three factors impacting teacher turnover: personal, school-related, and external pressures. The 2020 meta-analysis by Nguyen et al. (2020) also found that the current labor market may have an impact on teacher turnover rates. Younger teachers have higher turnover rates than their more experienced peers. Nguyen (2020) found that teachers aged 29 or older were 30% less likely to leave their school than younger teachers. Allen (2005) found that teacher attrition is highest among new teachers, but the chances of teachers leaving the profession decrease after the first four to five years. However, the rate of attrition rises again considerably after teachers have been in the field for 25 to 30 years (Allen, 2005). The causes for later attrition can be from retirement or taking a different career path with higher pay as retirement gets closer. Further, Allen (2005) also found that middle and high school teachers were more likely to leave education than elementary school teachers. As is commonly believed, research provides moderate evidence that teacher turnover tends to be higher in schools with larger populations of low-income, minority, and academically struggling students (Allen, 2005).

The studies for causes of teacher attrition often find that teachers who are happy with the school culture and administration are more likely to stay in the profession. Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo (2009) found that strong principal leadership could lower teacher attrition. Ladd (2011) completed a study on teacher perceptions and how that could lead to teacher turnover. She found that working conditions were a large factor in teacher turnover. Cha and Cohen-Vogel (2011) also found working conditions to be the highest indicator of teacher attrition; although they state that it is not always easy to track. The data indicate that, specifically, insufficient support from school administration, student discipline issues, limited faculty involvement in school decision-making, and, to a lesser degree, low salaries, are linked to higher turnover rates, even after accounting for the characteristics of both teachers and schools (Ingersoll, 2001).

Schools must find ways to retain high-quality teachers. Turnover can be extremely costly for school districts. A 2002 report by the Texas Center for Education Research estimated that teacher turnover in Texas costs the state \$329 million annually for recruitment and training (Cha & Cohen-Vogel, 2011). While financial losses are large, teacher attrition can also have many intangible losses. If a school loses a well-trained, highly qualified teacher, they have the potential to lose experience, a team member, student and parent relationships, and much more.

Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo (2009) found that teachers with students with higher test scores were less likely to leave; they argued that more effective teachers tend to stay in education than their less effective counterparts. They also found that teachers with specific teaching credentials (state licensure and education degrees) were more likely to remain in education. De Stercke et al. (2015) believe that there are three areas of focus necessary for new

teachers: educational advising/orientation, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence. They believe new teachers need better preparation coming into teacher education to alleviate teacher turnover (De Stercke et al., 2015). While better preparation may help with getting new teachers in the door, current teachers often cite job satisfaction as one of the top reasons they leave education. Brunetti (2001) wrote,

In a large-scale study of job satisfaction among American teachers, Perie and Baker (1997) reported several findings that have import for the present study. Using composite criteria to identify teachers as low, moderate, or high in job satisfaction, they found only 26.3 percent of public high-school teachers fit in the high category. They also found that the percentage of highly satisfied secondary teachers dropped consistently over their years of experience: 36.1 percent of teachers with three years of experience or less rated themselves as highly satisfied, while just under 23 percent of teachers with 20 years of experience rated themselves thus (p. 50).

Teacher retention is a national issue. Oyen and Schweinle (2020) reported that not only has teacher retention become a nationwide issue, but the issue is amplified in rural environments. Cha and Cohen-Vogel (2011) found that the need for special education, science, foreign language, and English as a Second Language teachers can be most severe in rural schools. Rural areas often lack the resources needed to attract highly qualified teachers. Rural systems cannot offer competitive salaries and benefits that larger systems can offer; they lack professional development opportunities, and living in a rural area can be less appealing to young, new teachers wanting to build a social life. Often, rural schools need teachers to be able to teach more

than one subject due to their smaller numbers, and they do not have strong, effective discipline systems, leaving newer teachers feeling overwhelmed (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020).

New teachers are not the only ones leaving the schools. Teacher stress is often listed as one of the main causes of teacher turnover. Stress in teachers can have a multitude of negative impacts on schools. From an organizational perspective, there is a notable loss of skilled and experienced teachers due to resignations and early retirements across all levels of the teaching profession. Meanwhile, teachers who remain in the education system despite stress are likely to become less effective in crucial areas, such as lesson planning, managing student behavior, responding to students' needs, and maintaining relationships with parents (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Teacher stress can have many personal impacts, such as damaged relationships, impaired health, and economic impacts, to name a few.

Teacher burnout has become a big buzzword in education as well. Burnout impacts the education world both externally and internally. Externally, its negative effects can be observed and quantified through teacher turnover and shortages (Chang, 2009). Teachers make numerous decisions daily. They strive to build relationships with students and other adults in their buildings, teach the content required, meet various student goals, maintain records, among many other requirements. Teachers commonly experience significant stress and burnout related to their work. Those with a strong sense of efficacy showed lower levels of burnout and felt more capable of managing their responsibilities. While veteran teachers tended to have greater efficacy, they reported higher burnout and were more likely to consider leaving the profession. Ultimately, stress and burnout were stronger predictors of intentions to leave teaching than either efficacy or coping abilities (Reinke et. al., 2025). Research also shows that rural schools

experience retention challenges shaped by place-based identity and community relationships. Teachers who feel connected to the local community are more likely to persist, suggesting that rural context cannot be separated from discussions of turnover (Seelig, 2021; Boone, 2018).

Teacher resilience is yet another aspect that has an impact on turnover and retention. Teacher resilience can be defined as the ability to adapt and recover from challenges by using personal strengths, social support, and environmental resources to effectively manage and overcome difficulties (Salvo-Garrido et. al., 2025). Salvo-Garrido et. al (2025) state, “teacher resilience is built through a complex interaction between personal, professional, and contextual factors. Among the most important factors are self-care, psychosocial support, and an institutional environment that facilitates teachers' emotional well-being” (p. 1). A resilient teacher is better equipped to handle the ever-expanding demands placed on educators daily. Shifting the focus from teacher stress and burnout to resilience offers a valuable perspective for understanding how teachers maintain their motivation and commitment during periods of change. Resilience, which refers to the ability to "bounce back" and recover quickly and effectively in the face of adversity, is closely linked to a strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy, and motivation to teach. These qualities are essential for fostering student achievement across all areas of their lives (Gu & Day, 2006).

Flores and Shuls (2024) found five factors that school leaders believe lead to teacher retention: positive school culture, supportive administration, strong professional development, mentoring programs, and classroom autonomy. The school leaders in the study agreed that school culture and supportive administration were the two most important aspects leading to teacher retention (Flores & Shuls, 2024). Lochmiller et al. (2024) also found that principal

leadership played a large part in teacher retention. Building on these findings, the role of school culture and climate emerges as a critical factor in shaping teachers' decisions to stay, highlighting the importance of a positive, supportive working environment.

School Culture and Climate

School culture and climate are often grouped in educational conversations. It is important to understand the difference between the two terms. Muhammad and Hollie (2012) explain that school culture establishes the norms and expectations within a school, encompassing various elements such as values, beliefs, practices, and traditions (p. 21). Similarly, Daniel Coyle (2018) describes culture as a dynamic set of relationships focused on a common goal, emphasizing that it is not a static identity but an ongoing process of action (p. xviii). According to the National Academies (2018), culture is both an individual and a social phenomenon. While it is reflected in the actions and beliefs of a person, it is also shaped by how individuals learn to work together with others. Culture is expressed in various forms, such as through personal behaviors, expectations, and beliefs; physical objects like tools and the design of spaces; social norms for communication, both verbal and nonverbal; and shared worldviews. In essence, culture involves not just the content of what people learn, but also the process through which they learn it. Culture deeply influences how individuals interpret experiences and engage with new information, shaping both what they learn and how they learn it (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Learning is not isolated from cultural context; rather, it is embedded within social interactions, practices, and environments that reflect shared cultural values and norms (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

School climate is the way a school feels: the belonging and connections, safety, and overall environment. According to Dernowska (2017, as cited in Ontong, 2022), fostering a positive school climate involves establishing an environment that supports effective learning and teaching for both students and educators. Ontong (2022) further emphasizes that a positive climate is crucial, serving as the key foundation for shaping any school culture. The following table outlines the definitions of school culture and climate, along with examples.

Table 2. Culture vs. Climate

Culture	Climate
The shared values, beliefs, traditions, and behaviors that define a school's character, shaping interactions, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among staff and students while fostering trust, engagement, and a commitment to student success.	The overall atmosphere of a school, encompassing relationships, safety, emotional and physical conditions, and perceptions of respect, support, inclusivity, and academic expectations, with a positive climate promoting student learning, well-being, and teacher retention, while a negative climate can lead to disengagement and high turnover rates.
<p>Example: A school that emphasizes collaboration and lifelong learning among staff and students has a culture where teachers regularly engage in peer observations and professional development, and students are encouraged to take initiative in their learning.</p> <p>-how things are done</p>	<p>Example: A school with a positive climate may have friendly student-teacher interactions, a sense of physical and emotional safety, and students who feel respected and supported throughout the day.</p> <p>-how it feels</p>

Various researchers have determined that school culture and climate have a large impact on student achievement; however, the importance of school culture and climate on teachers and teacher retention is not always as prevalent. Research indicates the overwhelming necessity of

strong, instructional leaders who can cultivate and foster a positive school climate and culture for both students and teachers. A study by Byrom et al. (2023) found that two important factors contributing to teacher retention in rural schools were principal decision-making and the culture and climate of the school. In rural schools, the role of culture and climate is particularly salient, as smaller communities often magnify the effects of leadership practices. For example, Vincent (2018) found that in high-poverty rural districts, intrinsic motivators such as self-efficacy and strong collegial relationships were critical for retention. Flores and Shuls (2024) found that school culture and supportive school leadership were the two most important factors when considering teacher retention. This highlights the crucial role of leadership in shaping a positive school culture, a perspective echoed by Lezotte and Snyder (2011), who emphasized the foundational elements necessary for effective schools.

Leadership

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) identified several foundational correlates of effective schools, including high expectations, strong leadership, collaboration, differentiated instruction, and frequent monitoring of student progress. While each of these elements is important, they argued that without effective leadership, the other correlates lose much of their power. Leadership is the integrating force that gives coherence and direction to school improvement. Bryk et al. (2010) similarly noted that “principals are the key levers for school-based change” (p. 61), underscoring their influence on the organizational and cultural conditions that determine whether teachers remain in a school. Van Camp (2020) emphasized that leaders must demonstrate authentic care for their people, suggesting that teacher persistence is not only linked to policy and structure but also to relational trust and the sense of being valued.

The importance of leadership becomes particularly evident in rural schools, where principals face distinctive challenges. Limited applicant pools, reduced administrative support, and constrained professional development opportunities place rural leaders at a disadvantage compared to their suburban and urban peers (Harmon & Schafft, 2020). As Muhammad (2009) observed, high turnover erodes institutional memory—a critical loss in rural contexts where small faculties often hold decades of accumulated knowledge about the school and community. In this setting, principals function not only as instructional leaders but also as cultural stewards, preserving relational trust and continuity. By fulfilling this dual role, rural leaders strengthen the sense of belonging that is vital for teacher retention.

Despite the pivotal role of principals, leadership preparation is often inconsistent across programs. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) emphasized that many leaders enter the profession without adequate training in instructional leadership. Similarly, a report from the Institute for Educational Leadership (2000, as cited in Muhammad & Hollie, 2011) concluded that principal effectiveness is the most significant factor in improving school performance, yet preparation programs often fail to equip leaders with necessary competencies. Stronge (2008) noted that principals must not only oversee curriculum and instruction but also foster professional learning communities and anticipate future changes. Insufficient preparation undermines these efforts and can negatively affect teacher confidence in leadership, thereby weakening retention.

A crucial dimension of effective leadership lies in articulating and enacting a mission and vision. DuFour et al. (2016) explained that a mission statement defines why a school exists, while a vision statement conveys what it aspires to become. Stronge (2008) emphasized that

effective principals translate mission and vision into measurable goals that drive progress. Schmoker (2018) cautioned that complexity in goals can overwhelm teachers, while Fullan (2016) argued that clarity builds trust and engagement. For teachers, a coherent and actionable vision fosters alignment and shared purpose, which reduces frustration and provides the professional stability necessary for long-term commitment.

Equally important is the cultivation of collaboration and trust. Muhammad and Hollie (2011) argued that leaders are responsible for fostering shared values among faculty, while Chenoweth (2022) stressed that trust and problem-solving must be embedded into the school culture. Coyle (2018) similarly highlighted that safe, trusting environments sustain productivity and morale. Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer a practical structure for collaboration, and Eaker et al. (2021) noted that their success depends on skillful leadership that balances support with accountability. Van Camp (2020) compared trust to an unwritten contract between leaders and staff. When teachers feel trusted and supported, they are more likely to remain committed to their schools.

Recognition and celebration also contribute significantly to retention. DuFour et al. (2016) advised leaders to intentionally acknowledge accomplishments, both small and large, to reinforce collective commitments. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) found that positive emotions, such as joy and pride, sustain teacher motivation, while Kouzes and Posner (2017) argued that recognition deepens collaboration and trust. Such practices are not peripheral; they shape the relational climate in ways that help teachers feel valued, increasing their willingness to stay in a school despite external pressures or financial incentives elsewhere.

Accountability is likewise central to leadership, but it must be paired with support. Muhammad and Hollie (2011) contended that accountability without resources and guidance is ineffective and unethical. Earl and Katz (2006, as cited in Muhammad & Hollie, 2011) noted that accountability often requires difficult conversations with resistant staff, yet such discussions are essential for improvement. When handled effectively, accountability signals fairness and consistency, both of which strengthen teacher trust in leadership. Conversely, tolerance of incompetence undermines collective morale and may contribute to attrition (Bryk et al., 2010).

Finally, instructional leadership requires principals to be well-informed students of teaching and learning. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) argued that principals must possess pedagogical knowledge and model professional practices, while Bryk et al. (2010) emphasized that the absence of instructional guidance creates fragmentation and undermines coherence. Teachers are more likely to remain in schools where leaders can analyze instruction, provide formative feedback, and ensure alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In this way, instructional leadership directly supports teacher efficacy and professional growth, both of which are central to retention.

Taken together, the literature affirms that leadership is a multidimensional construct encompassing vision, collaboration, trust, recognition, accountability, and instructional expertise. Each of these dimensions has been shown to influence teacher satisfaction, professional belonging, and ultimately teacher persistence. While leadership is essential in all schools, it takes on heightened importance in rural contexts, where principals serve simultaneously as instructional leaders and cultural anchors. By shaping the conditions that sustain teachers,

effective principals directly influence whether schools can maintain stable, committed faculties over time.

Leadership and Teacher Retention

School leadership has a profound impact on teacher retention. In a large-scale study, Ladd (2011) identified the quality of school leadership as the most significant factor associated with teacher turnover. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) similarly found that principals shape the daily experiences of teachers by influencing collaboration time, discipline procedures, scheduling, and professional development—all of which directly affect teacher satisfaction, effectiveness, and persistence. More recent work by Lochmiller, Perrone, and Finley (2024) underscores that teachers' beliefs about how leadership manages these areas significantly influences their decision to remain in or leave the profession. In many respects, the principal is the single most influential figure in shaping school working conditions, thereby playing a pivotal role in teacher retention.

Instructional leadership further strengthens this connection. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) asserted that “effective leaders are effective teachers” (p. 53), highlighting the link between instructional knowledge and leadership capacity. Teachers consistently express the need for leaders who demonstrate both understanding and compassion in their practice. Allen (2005) established a direct relationship between teacher retention and supportive administration, while Scallon, Bristol, and Esboldt (2023) identified three practices that distinguished principals in schools with low turnover: valuing teachers as knowledgeable contributors, clearly articulating the school's vision for high-quality teaching, and prioritizing student learning. These findings

illustrate how leadership practices not only shape school culture but also directly influence teachers' sense of professional respect and belonging.

Leadership decisions and organizational culture emerge repeatedly in the literature as decisive factors in teacher retention. Byrom et al. (2023) concluded that principals' decisions and the cultures they cultivate strongly shape faculty commitment. Blaushild and Seelig (2024) examined retention through the lens of human capital management and again found school culture to be a central determinant. Effective leaders foster teacher buy-in, attend to teacher well-being, and manage expectations for adults within the school. When culture is collaborative and affirming, teachers are more likely to remain; when culture is fragmented or unsupportive, turnover rates increase.

This relationship between leadership and retention is especially salient in rural schools. Studies consistently show that rural teachers' perceptions of their principals strongly shape retention outcomes. Barnes (2013) found that teachers in rural Pennsylvania schools directly linked their decision to stay or leave to the degree of principal support. Similarly, Frahm (2020) reported that visible, relationship-oriented leadership behaviors encouraged persistence in rural districts. Beyond leadership practices alone, rural teacher retention is deeply tied to place and community. Research demonstrates that teachers embedded in rural communities through family ties, church, or extracurricular activities are significantly more likely to remain (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Seelig, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of leadership that not only supports teachers professionally but also connects them meaningfully to the surrounding community.

Yet rural leaders often contend with systemic inequities that exacerbate retention challenges. Showalter et al. (2019) reported that rural schools nationally receive nearly 20% less per-pupil funding than urban districts, limiting their ability to offer competitive salaries, invest in professional development, or provide adequate instructional resources. In such contexts, principals must work creatively to sustain teacher commitment despite fewer material supports. This reality highlights the heightened significance of leadership in rural schools: while systemic inequities constrain structural solutions, strong and supportive leadership can mitigate these challenges and foster conditions that encourage teachers to stay.

Summary

Teacher retention is a critical factor in maintaining the stability and effectiveness of schools. High teacher turnover disrupts student learning, increases financial burdens for districts, and diminishes the sense of community within a school. Retaining teachers is especially important for fostering continuity in curriculum delivery, building strong relationships with students, and maintaining institutional knowledge. Research highlights that teacher turnover can disproportionately affect schools serving historically marginalized communities, exacerbating educational inequities. A stable and supportive teaching force contributes to improved student outcomes, higher teacher morale, and the overall success of the school.

School leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering teacher retention. Principals and administrators significantly influence school climate and culture, which are key factors in teachers' decisions to stay. Effective leaders prioritize creating a positive work environment by recognizing teachers as valued professionals, providing opportunities for professional growth,

and maintaining clear communication about the school's vision. A healthy school climate—characterized by trust, collaboration, and respect—creates a sense of belonging and professional satisfaction among teachers. By addressing factors such as workload, autonomy, and student behavior management, school leaders can cultivate a culture that not only supports teacher well-being but also reduces turnover, ensuring long-term benefits for both educators and students.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Chapter III will outline the methodology employed to achieve the objectives of this study. The rationale for using a case study will be discussed in depth within this chapter. This chapter plan consists of sections on research purpose and questions, theoretical framework, subjectivity, viewpoint of the study, as well as research design, research site, participant selection, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, rigor, and timeline.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methodology used for this qualitative, instrumental case study on the exploration of the actions and beliefs of the leader at a rural, middle Tennessee high school and how those actions and beliefs encourage teacher retention. This approach will allow the researcher to glean a better understanding of the potential influence a principal has upon teacher retention within a particular school. These research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: In a rural high school with high teacher retention, what factors does the principal believe contribute to teachers staying at the school?

RQ2: In a rural high school with high teacher retention, how does the faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention?

RQ3: In what ways does the principal encourage teacher retention at this rural high school?

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework that requires the researcher to begin with the school principal. The principal shares his thoughts on what he believes about teacher retention and what actions he feels he should take to encourage teacher retention. The researcher then considers the thoughts of the teachers on what actions the principal takes that encourage teacher retention. The final piece is a follow-up conversation with the principal, sharing what teachers believe and discussing the connections between these ideas.

This framework is grounded in transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of leaders fostering trust, collaboration, and shared goals to influence organizational outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006). It also draws on social exchange theory, which suggests that when leaders support and value their staff, teachers are more likely to feel committed and remain in their positions (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 2001). By examining both leader intent and teacher perceptions, the framework aligns with research showing that perceived principal support is a key factor in teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011).

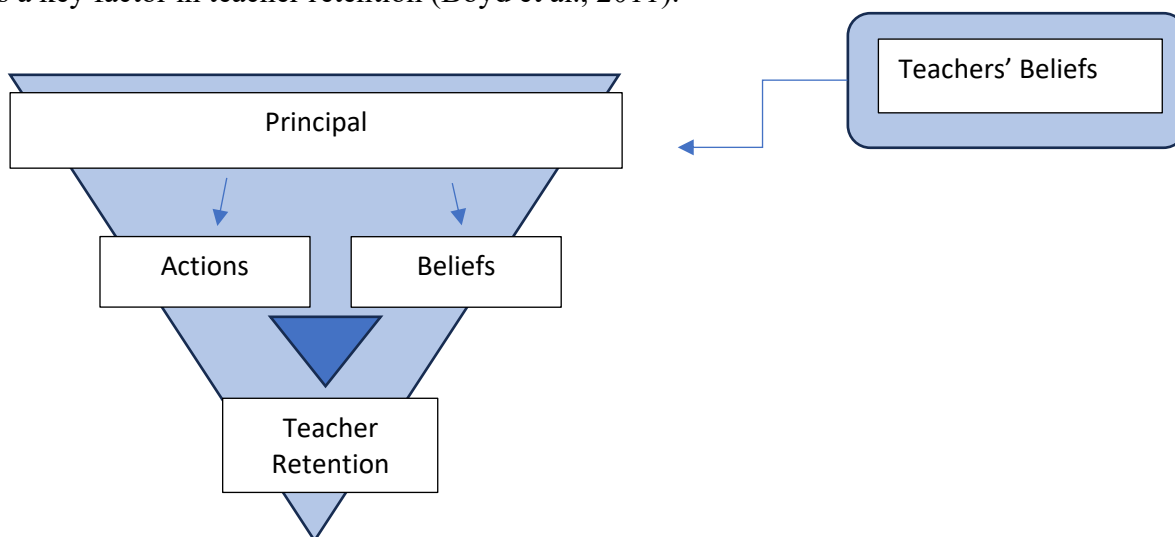


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Subjectivity / Positionality Statement

Originally, I began my undergraduate program as a biology major with expectations of becoming a medical student and eventually a surgeon. While I enjoyed the idea of medicine and science, I was not enjoying the work required to get me there. I began to consider other career paths. After meeting and talking with an advisor, I signed up for some education courses.

During this time, I did a couple of different jobs in education. I worked on a traveling school bus where I taught interactive lessons using books and hands-on projects to children at different high-poverty schools in South Georgia. I also taught art lessons to kindergarten through third graders and summer school to second graders. Through these different jobs, I found that I loved working with children and watching them learn.

I finished my undergraduate degree in Middle Grades Education with a focus on English and Social Studies in May 2004 from Georgia Southwestern State University. I began teaching sixth grade English in July 2004. I was moved to 7th grade literature my second year of teaching. I noticed the struggle for teachers to find and keep jobs in education during this time. To make myself more marketable in education, I decided to return to school in May of 2005 to obtain a master's degree. I completed my degree as a Reading Specialist one year later.

From the fall of 2006 to the spring of 2010, I worked in two different schools with four different principals. In August 2007, I began working for a middle school in Nashville. I took a job teaching 7th and 8th grade ELA. The next year, I was asked to teach 7th-grade ELA and Geography. In the third year, I was told that I was one of the last teachers hired, and I may be moved across the district due to a change in student enrollment. After a review, they found another teacher had 1 day less than I did at the school, and he was moved instead of me. I was

then asked to teach 7th-grade English only. At the end of my third year, my family moved again, and I was unable to secure a job for the 2010-11 school year.

In 2011, I was asked to teach math and science at a private school in Middle Tennessee. I accepted the position, and I taught math for 6th-7th grade, Algebra 1, and science to 6th-8th grades. It was a large teaching load for a middle school teacher. I returned to public school in 2012. I taught a 5th-grade self-contained class. After this school year, I decided to step away from education for a while. I was accepted into the Athletic Training program at Middle Tennessee State University, and I turned my focus toward that path with a plan to return to education in a different capacity once I finished the degree.

I had a major life change that required me to leave the Athletic Training program and return to teaching. I took a mid-year vacancy at a high-poverty elementary school teaching 5th-grade English and Social Studies. After accepting this position, I found out that this school had become known for the constant teacher turnover. At the end of the year, many teachers were non-renewed, while others chose to leave.

During the summer, I decided to take the Praxis to get my high school endorsement in English. I was offered a position teaching 10th-grade English that fall. There was a leadership change after my second year, but I was allowed to remain teaching the same area for 3 years. This is when I decided I wanted to pursue my options in leadership. I enrolled in a cohort program at Middle Tennessee State University in Curriculum and Instruction with an administrative pathway. After my 3rd year, I was asked to teach 12th-grade English as well as 10th-grade English. During my 4th year teaching at the high school, a lot of changes started happening within the school. I noticed a culture shift, and then, Covid happened. The term

teacher shortage was bouncing around before COVID, but it became a much larger issue once COVID was real. I completed my Specialist degree in Curriculum and Instruction in the summer of 2020.

Over the next 4 years, I taught at two more schools: one middle school, where I taught 7th grade ELA for 2 years before being asked to move to 8th grade Social Studies, and one high school, where I have taught English III for the last two years. The middle school had a leadership change while I was there. Since beginning my teaching career, I have worked in 9 different schools for 13 different principals. Both schools, as well as the previous high school, have struggled with teacher retention over the last several years.

After sixteen-plus years in education, I have watched the teacher retention issue grow. I have had the privilege of holding various leadership positions throughout my tenure as an educator. These positions have led me to think deeper about the actual job and abilities of school leaders. Through this questioning, I decided to further my education. I began my path toward an Educational Doctorate in Assessment, Learning, and School Improvement at MTSU in the fall of 2022. The focus on leadership brought me to focus my research on the connection between a rural high school leader and teacher retention.

Viewpoint of the Study

Bhattacharya (2017) writes, “Epistemology focuses on how we know what we know” (p. 11). Constructivist epistemology emphasizes that meaning is not discovered but constructed, and individuals create understanding based on their unique experiences (Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002). This philosophical stance underpins the interpretive paradigm, which holds that reality is socially and culturally constructed and best understood through the perspectives of those experiencing it.

As Erickson (as cited in Stake, 1995) notes, qualitative inquiry centers on interpretation, and interpretivism provides a lens through which the researcher can explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Within the broader interpretivist paradigm, this study adopts symbolic interactionism as its guiding theoretical perspective. Symbolic interactionism builds on constructivist and interpretivist foundations by focusing specifically on how people derive meaning through social interactions and the interpretation of symbols, language, and behavior. It is particularly useful for examining how individuals, such as school principals, perceive and enact their roles based on their interpretations of interactions and expectations. In this study, the researcher aims to understand how a principal makes meaning of and acts upon his role in teacher retention, guided by the belief that such meaning is shaped through ongoing interaction with teachers and the school context.

Research Design

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry serves as the model for constructivist qualitative research (Hatch, 2002). While naturalistic inquiry has a set of procedures and methods to follow, it is not as rigid as other paths (Hatch, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1982) wrote, “Naturalistic inquiry is a ...pattern or model for how inquiry may be conducted” (p.233). Bhattacharya (2017) writes, “Qualitative research...aims to work within the context of human experiences and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (p.6). The goal of this study is to find connections between what a rural high school principal believes and does about teacher retention.

This research study is qualitative and conducted through an instrumental case study methodology. A case study is appropriate when the specific nuances of a situation lend to understanding within a set context (Stake, 1995). This work focuses on an intrinsic case study to explore how the beliefs and actions of the principal of the school affect teacher retention. This type of case study concentrates on a distinctive, information-rich situation, issue, or problem, choosing a defined system to examine as the case (Bhattacharya, 2017). The researcher seeks to understand how a principal in a rural setting can retain teachers at such a high level.

Research Site

This study took place in a rural, Middle Tennessee high school serving a geographically dispersed community where agriculture, local industry, and long-standing family networks shape daily school life. The school was selected based on a 2022–23 data analysis from the Tennessee State Board of Education on teacher retention. Oyen and Schweinle (2020) define rural by writing, “most definitions include a measure of the density of the population as well as the distance from populous centers. When distance from population centers increases, unique factors that may lead to recruitment problems may emerge” (p. 12). This aligns with the context of the selected school, where long travel distances, limited housing options for incoming educators, and reduced access to specialized services create a distinctly rural working environment.

Rural schools often struggle to find and retain teachers due to the lower salary scale and lack of benefits that other school systems can provide. Additionally, rural districts frequently face reduced applicant pools, fewer certification-area specialists, and limited professional development access compared to urban or suburban centers (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Despite

these challenges, this school has established a pattern of higher-than-average teacher retention, a rarity among rural high schools in the region and therefore a compelling site for an intrinsic case study. The school also functions as a social and cultural anchor for the community—hosting athletic events, serving as a gathering space, and maintaining intergenerational traditions—which further elevates the importance of understanding teacher retention within this rural context.

The researcher contacted the director of schools via email for permission to work within the district at the school that meets the criteria below. The school system required the researcher to complete an IRB process within their system before granting permission to complete the study. Once that IRB process was complete and permission was granted, the researcher contacted the principal via email to gain further permission for conducting research within the school. The first criterion for the selected school was its higher-than-average state retention rate for teachers. Another criterion of the site was that it contains grades 9–12. The school serves students from multiple small communities and unincorporated areas, some of whom travel significant distances to attend. The principal has more than three years of experience in the principal role at the school being studied. The teaching staff includes lifelong community members, educators who transferred from other rural schools, and teachers who relocated to the area, creating a blend of local knowledge and diverse professional experiences typical of a rural faculty workforce.

Participant Selection

As shown in Table 3 below, this study includes research participants purposefully selected from the school's teaching and administrative staff. The purpose of intentionally selecting faculty is to identify individuals with diverse experiences in this context, particularly

regarding the principal's impact on teacher retention. The table includes demographic information, and the study focuses on the head principal. The principal is central to this research because leadership practices directly influence teacher commitment and retention. Grounded in transformational and social exchange theories, the framework highlights how principals foster trust and support, which are key drivers of teachers' decisions to stay (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Blau, 1964; Boyd et al., 2011). The head principal was invited to participate via email, including a description of the research plan. Once the principal agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled to fit his schedule. The interview, which was intended to last about 45-60 mins, lasted for an hour and a half. Principal John was very thorough in his responses.

Staff with five or more years of experience within this school received an email with research information asking for their voluntary participation. Teachers were originally asked to participate in focus groups. After trying to obtain enough volunteers to meet the need for the study, the researcher had to switch directions for teacher data collection. One teacher asked for an individual interview while all other teachers agreed to answer questions via email. The researcher scheduled a phone interview with the teacher that requested it based on their availability, and then sent all teachers a questionnaire via email, which they were asked to complete at a time aligned with their schedules and comfort levels.

Table 3. Research Participants Demographics

Position	Pseudonyms	Gender	Highest Degree	Years of Experience	Years at School
Principal	John	M	EDS	19	4
Participant 1 (Math)	Anna	F	BSED	31	29

Participant 2 (English)	Grace	F	MSED	24	9
Participant 3 (English)	Olivia	F	EDD	18	7
Participant 4 (CTE)	Drew	M	MAT	13	13
Participant 5 (Foreign Language)	Eliza	F	EDS	23	13
Participant 6 (Math)	Jack	M	BSED	28	23
Participant 7 (Science)	Helen	F	EDS	19	19
Participant 8 (History)	Matt	M	BSED	10	10

With the focus on a rural high school, this table has space for individuals from multiple content areas. The table has been adjusted based on the study.

Principal John

John has accumulated nineteen years of experience in the field of education, entering the profession through a non-traditional pathway. After initially working outside of education, including time in industry and retail, he returned to college to complete his teacher preparation program while supporting a young family. His teaching career began in a small county K–8 school, where he taught mathematics and science for six years while also coaching and coordinating extracurricular activities.

Following this period, John transitioned into administration. He first served as principal of another small county pre-K–8 school before accepting the principalship of a small middle school. He then moved into the role of assistant principal at a rural high school, a position he

held for eight years. Ultimately, he was offered the head principalship at his current school, where he now serves as the instructional leader.

Although his time in the classroom was relatively brief compared to his years in administration, John's career has been deeply rooted in rural schools and communities. These experiences have given him a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges facing rural education, particularly those related to teacher recruitment and retention. His professional journey reflects both resilience and dedication, shaped by his commitment to serve students, teachers, and communities in rural contexts.

Teacher Anna

Anna is a veteran high school mathematics teacher with thirty-one years of experience in education. She began her career as a homebound instructor and later taught in a private school within her small community. During her teacher preparation program, Anna completed student teaching placements in both urban and suburban schools; however, her professional career has been entirely situated in rural contexts. Over the years, she has earned multiple certifications and is currently pursuing a master's degree in mathematics education.

Although Anna expressed an appreciation for the culture and atmosphere of rural schools, she emphasized that her primary reason for remaining at her current school is its proximity to family. She reported receiving offers from other districts that included higher salaries and more comprehensive benefits, yet she has consistently chosen to remain in her rural school due to the personal and professional value of location and community.

Anna also described the role of school leadership in teacher retention, noting that the principal has implemented efforts to strengthen school climate through initiatives such as birthday celebrations and the establishment of a climate committee. While acknowledging that multiple factors contribute to teacher persistence, she highlighted communication as the most significant. Anna explained that she feels comfortable approaching her principal directly with concerns and actively encourages her colleagues to do the same, underscoring the importance of open communication in fostering teacher commitment and retention.

Teacher Grace

Grace is a high school English teacher who also teaches dual enrollment and creative writing courses. Her professional background includes teaching college-level writing, GED preparation, and courses at a local community college. She has served at her current high school in various capacities for ten years, with the past five years as a full-time faculty member.

Like other participants, Grace emphasized that her decision to remain at the school is strongly influenced by proximity to her home and family. She also highlighted the importance of collegial connections, noting that friendships with colleagues contribute to her sense of belonging within the school community. In addition, Grace expressed confidence in the leadership of the principal and other administrators, describing them as approachable and supportive. She explained that she feels comfortable addressing concerns directly with the principal and trusts that her voice will be heard. Ultimately, Grace identified both location and school climate as the primary factors influencing her commitment to remain at the school.

Teacher Olivia

Olivia has been teaching for eighteen years, beginning her career at a suburban high school where she taught English for ten years, followed by one year in an urban district. For the past seven years, she has served as an English teacher at her current rural high school. Olivia identified proximity to home and alignment with her own children's schooling as primary factors in both her decision to transition to a rural district and her continued commitment to remain there.

She explained that, in her view, many teachers choose positions in rural schools largely because of their proximity to home and the desire to simplify life responsibilities. Olivia also described the positive impact of school leadership on teacher satisfaction, highlighting the principal's approachable and friendly demeanor, which she felt contributes to a "family-like" atmosphere among the staff. She referenced the establishment of a climate committee as an example of efforts to address the needs of both students and teachers. Additionally, Olivia reported feeling comfortable speaking with the principal about her concerns in most circumstances, reinforcing her perception of an open and supportive leadership style.

Teacher Drew

Drew has served in education for thirteen years, though his professional pathway was non-traditional. Prior to entering the teaching profession, he worked in the heating and air industry before making the decision to pursue a career in education later in life. He is currently employed as a Career and Technical Education (CTE) teacher.

Although Drew grew up in an urban setting, his entire teaching career has been situated in rural schools. He identified proximity as one of the primary factors influencing both his decision to begin teaching in a rural district and his continued commitment to remain there. Drew also emphasized the role of school leadership in fostering teacher satisfaction and retention. He credited the principal with establishing initiatives that boost morale through teacher and student recognition, as well as with celebrating achievements and successes throughout the school community. In addition, Drew consistently described the principal as approachable and supportive, noting that he feels comfortable communicating concerns directly. He further observed that the principal works deliberately to retain high-quality teachers, reinforcing his perception of leadership as a central factor in his decision to stay.

Teacher Eliza

Eliza has been an educator for twenty-three years. She began her career in special education, where she taught for ten years before transitioning to her current role in foreign language—a subject she described as her professional passion. She has served in this capacity for thirteen years. Beyond her classroom responsibilities, Eliza is actively engaged in several extracurricular activities as a teacher leader, provides instruction for homebound students after school hours, and organizes an international student travel program during the summer months.

Eliza identified her students as the primary factor motivating her to continue teaching year after year, noting that her enjoyment of working with them sustains her professional commitment. She also highlighted the value of collegial relationships and a positive school culture, explaining that she benefits from strong peer support and a collaborative environment.

Eliza attributed much of this culture to the principal's leadership, describing his approach as balancing "freedom while also maintaining rules and consistency," which she believes contributes to a healthy and supportive workplace. According to Eliza, teachers remain in the school largely due to strong community ties, collegial support, and the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in students' lives.

In addition, Eliza credited the principal with maintaining an open-door policy and fostering a culture of communication. She noted that the principal actively supports professional development, encourages staff feedback, and works intentionally to sustain a positive school climate. These leadership practices, in her view, are central to both her satisfaction and the retention of faculty more broadly.

Teacher Jack

Jack is a high school mathematics teacher with twenty-eight years of experience in education. He began his career in another rural district, where he taught for one year before transitioning to a middle school position. After several years at the middle school level, he accepted his current role at the high school, where he has now taught for twenty-three years. Throughout his career, Jack has worked exclusively in rural schools, giving him extensive experience with the unique challenges and opportunities of rural education.

Jack explained that his decision to work in his current district was strongly influenced by proximity to his family and church community. While he acknowledged the difficulty of retaining teachers in the face of surrounding counties that offer higher salaries, he believes most

teachers ultimately remain for similar reasons to his own connection to family, community, and place. Jack also emphasized the role of collegiality, noting that strong relationships with fellow teachers enhance the overall work environment. Finally, he identified administrative communication and support as essential for teacher retention, suggesting that transparent leadership and consistent encouragement from school administrators are among the most effective strategies for keeping teachers in rural schools.

Teacher Helen

Helen has been an educator for nineteen years, all of which have been spent at her current school. She teaches a variety of science courses and serves as the sponsor of a student club. Like many of her colleagues, Helen reported that proximity was the primary reason she chose to teach at this school, noting that she has remained in the position because it is in her hometown.

Helen described the administration as highly supportive and credited the current principal with implementing initiatives designed to improve school morale. She highlighted the establishment of a climate committee, which she believes has positively influenced the work environment. Recognition programs such as “Teacher of the Month” and acknowledgments during Teacher Appreciation Week were viewed as meaningful strategies that have strengthened teacher morale and fostered a greater sense of value among staff. Helen also noted that the introduction of a new school schedule was another positive change initiated by the principal. Consistent with other participants, she explained that teachers are encouraged to share feedback with the principal, reinforcing the perception of open communication and collaborative leadership.

Teacher Matt

Matt is a high school history teacher with ten years of experience in education, all of which have been at his current school. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, he serves in a leadership capacity within the school. Matt identified proximity and community ties as the primary factors influencing his decision to remain at the school year after year.

He explained that while lower salaries and limited benefits are ongoing challenges in rural education, teachers are more likely to remain when they experience a positive school culture. According to Matt, a supportive and collegial environment can outweigh material disadvantages by fostering a sense of belonging and professional satisfaction. He also noted that the principal encourages teachers to provide honest and constructive feedback, which he views as an important avenue for identifying areas of growth and improvement within the school.

Data Collection

To complete this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews (SSI) and questionnaires. Adams (2015) writes, “Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, the SSI employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (p.493). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to delve into the topics a little more than relying on a specific set of pre-determined questions (Adams, 2015). The semi-structured interviews took place during the data collection phase of the case study. The head principal participated in the first interview (see Appendix A.1 for a copy of the interview protocol). In the first interview, I requested to follow up after all other interviews were completed if needed. The questions presented during the initial lead principal interview explored

his perceived actions and beliefs on teacher retention within his school, as well as demographic information. After receiving data from the teachers, it was determined that a follow-up interview was not necessary.

The teachers participated by completing questionnaires and/or interviews. The teacher questionnaires explored why the teachers chose to stay at this school and if the principal's actions do or do not affect their decision to return (see Appendix A.3 for a copy of the interview protocol). The teacher questionnaires collected demographic information, the role of the teacher within the school, as well as the teachers views on how the principal impacts retention decisions. Seven teachers completed questionnaires via email, and one teacher chose to have a phone interview. The researcher completed follow up emails for specific actions taken by the principal that encourage teacher retention as needed.

All interviews were scheduled to take approximately an hour and were recorded via Otter AI and a secondary voice recorder. The principal interview took place in person and was transcribed via Otter AI, and the teacher interview took place via phone call. The researcher used member checking to ensure trustworthiness for each interview. At the end of the interview, each participant was allowed to review a summary of the interview notes, making sure all the major points have been captured accurately and that no information is missing or incorrect. Each participant was asked if they would like a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy of the interview before analysis (Stake, 1995). All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from their interviews and questionnaires to maintain anonymity.

Data Analysis

Stake (1995) writes, “qualitative study capitalizes on ordinary ways of making sense,” and “the page does not write itself, but in finding, for analysis, the right ambiance, the right moment, by reading and rereading the accounts, by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward” (p.72-73). The researcher continually read the data collected for connections and themes. Inductive analysis, or as Bhattacharya (2017) writes, “working ‘up’ from the data,” was the approach used once the data was collected. Bhattacharya (2017) writes, “the researcher moves back and forth between various stages and processes” (p.150). The researcher chunked the data collected and continuously read and analyzed it for connections.

The researcher conducted multiple rounds of coding analysis on interviews in the order they are completed. Coding was used to help the researcher understand the perspectives of the participants and to identify emerging themes from their experiences. When the researcher separates the information into smaller chunks, it is called “splitter” coding (Bernard, 2011, as cited in Saldana, 2013, p.23). The researcher will use descriptive coding to categorize the initial codes. Codes were created based on the initial coding round. Saldana (2013) writes, “Descriptive Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms” (p.88).

The second round of coding used pattern coding. Saldana (2013) writes, “Pattern Codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis. They are a sort of meta-code. ...Pattern Coding is a way of grouping those summaries

into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Saldana, p.210). As patterns emerged from the coding rounds, the researcher used narrative description and matrix display to present the results. Once coding was completed and categories were narrowed, the researcher recorded the data into a chart with an explanation of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Glesne (2011) writes, “Trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study, about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research was carried out” (p.53). Guba and Lincoln (1982) identified four areas of importance when considering trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following paragraphs will discuss each of the aspects of trustworthiness and detail how they are incorporated into the study.

Tracy (2010) defines credibility as “the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (p.842). Shenton (2004) identifies fourteen strategies necessary for guaranteeing credibility in qualitative research. For this study, the researcher utilized “well established research methods” as one strategy to guarantee credibility. The method will be a case study as defined by Stake. The researcher conducted interviews to ensure triangulation of the study. All participants were given the opportunity to refuse participation to promote honesty during the study. The researcher provided personal background information to show credibility of the researcher and conducted member checks throughout the data collection. Shenton (2004) writes, “Checks relating to the accuracy of the data may take place ‘on the spot’ in the course, and at the end, of the data collection dialogues” (p.68). “Credible reports are those that readers feel trustworthy enough to act on and make decisions in line with” (Tracy, 2010, p.843).

For transferability to take place, researchers must be able to apply the outcomes of one study to other settings (Shenton, 2004). Transferability was limited in this study due to the unique nature of the topic; however the researcher ensured participants have the appropriate experience to participate in the study, the demographic information necessary for participants is presented in the study, and that all data collection information was accurate and clear. Vignettes, or small snapshots, from the interviews will be used to identify key themes for the study providing readers the opportunity to see the information. Stake (1995) writes, “Following a constructivist view of knowledge does not require the researcher to avoid delivering generalizations. But a constructivist view encourages providing readers with good raw material for their own generalizing” (p.102)

Dependability requires researchers to describe with full clarity and in detail their methods and techniques so future researchers could potentially repeat the process and garner similar results (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) identifies three key areas for establishing dependability in qualitative research: (1) the research design and its implementation, such as clearly outlining the study’s purpose, methodology, and participant selection; (2) the operational detail of data gathering, including consistent interview protocols and thorough documentation of procedures; and (3) reflective appraisal of the project, which involves ongoing evaluation of the research process and adaptations made in response to emerging challenges (p. 72). Each of these components was integrated into the completed study to ensure transparency, consistency, and credibility.

Miles et al. (2020), wrote, “The basic issue here can be framed as one of relative neutrality and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases—at the minimum,

explicitness about the inevitable biases that exist” (p.311). The absence of researcher bias provides confirmability or objectivity. The researcher manually coded the interviews, conducted member checking to validate and check for accuracy, and ensured triangulation to provide confirmability within the study. Consistency was maintained by conducting all interviews in the same manner. The researcher gathered all information through in person interviews and email questionnaires while using Otter AI for accuracy and transcription.

Summary

This qualitative case study aimed to examine the perceptions of a rural Tennessee high school principal regarding the actions and beliefs that contribute to higher-than-average teacher retention. Understanding these perspectives can provide valuable insights into effective leadership practices that support teacher retention in similar educational settings. Chapter 4 presents the key themes that emerged throughout the study, offering an in-depth discussion of the findings. By analyzing these insights, this study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation on strategies that promote teacher stability and long-term success in rural schools

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to present a comprehensive understanding of the factors that encourage teachers to remain in their positions at a rural high school with high teacher retention. Drawing on data collected from both the principal and faculty members, this chapter presents the findings aligned with the study's research questions: (1) In a rural high school with high teacher retention, what factors does the principal believe contribute to teachers staying at the school? (2) In a rural high school with high teacher retention, how does the faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention? and (3) In what ways does the principal encourage teacher retention at this rural high school?

The findings reported here reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of participants as they described the conditions, practices, and relationships that shape teacher persistence in a rural context. Coding and thematic analysis produced a set of recurring patterns across the data, which were then condensed into major themes and super themes that capture the most salient aspects of teacher retention within this school setting. These themes highlight the complex interplay between personal relationships / community, school climate, leadership practices, and teacher voice. Because this study occurred in a rural high school, many of the themes uncovered—such as proximity to family, community embeddedness, and close teacher relationships—reflect dynamics commonly associated with rural education. Rural schools often serve as community anchors, and teachers frequently maintain multi-generational ties to the area, shaping the ways they interpret leadership, climate, and belonging. These contextual characteristics provide a meaningful backdrop for understanding the findings that follow.

This chapter is organized into three main sections. First, the perspectives of the principal are analyzed, with emphasis on how his leadership philosophy and practices contribute to retention. Second, faculty perspectives are presented, offering insight into how teachers interpret and experience leadership actions and school culture in ways that influence their decisions to remain. Finally, the themes from both perspectives are synthesized into broader super themes that illustrate the relational, organizational, and cultural dynamics underpinning teacher retention in this rural high school. By presenting the findings in this structure, the chapter provides a clear foundation for the discussion in Chapter 5, where the results will be interpreted in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework.

The first section of this chapter presents the perspective of the school principal, whose leadership practices and beliefs play a central role in shaping teacher retention. As the instructional leader and cultural anchor of the school, the principal's viewpoint provides important insight into the organizational, relational, and cultural factors that sustain faculty commitment in a rural setting. His interview data highlight the ways in which leadership philosophy, hiring practices, school climate, and responsiveness to teacher needs contribute to a stable teaching force.

Principal Interview Data Analysis

Table 4 provides a detailed overview of the coding process from the principal's interview, showing the progression from initial codes to categories, themes, and theoretical alignments. This table illustrates how discrete statements from the principal were condensed into broader concepts that align with the study's three research questions.

Table 4. Initial Codes to Research Questions

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Theories</i>	<i>Research Questions</i>
Love for students, collegial bonds	Relational & Community Factors	Relationships and Community Drive Retention	Social Capital Theory; Relational-Cultural Theory	RQ1
Safe environment, discipline support, morale events	School Climate	Positive Climate and Safety Encourage Loyalty	Organizational Climate Theory; Positive Organizational Scholarship	RQ1
Comfort zones, fear of change	Psychological Stability	Comfort and Stability as Retention Factors	Organizational Commitment Theory	RQ1
Modeling professionalism, covering classes	Leadership Practices	Servant Leadership and Responsive Leadership	Servant Leadership Theory; Social Learning Theory	RQ2 RQ3
Hiring through networks, cultural fit	Recruitment Practices	Intentional Hiring and Recruitment	Human Capital & Social Network Theory	RQ3
Advisory council, surveys, teacher input	Feedback Channels	Teacher Voice and Feedback	Participative Leadership Theory; LMX	RQ3
Fairness and transparency	Leadership Values	Responsive and Fair Leadership	Transformational Leadership; Pragmatic Leadership	RQ2 RQ3

As shown in Table 4, the principal emphasized relationships, climate, leadership practices, and feedback as central to retention, which were then mapped to theoretical frameworks such as Social Capital Theory, Organizational Climate Theory, and Servant Leadership Theory.

The analysis of principal data produced four super themes that explain factors contributing to teacher retention at a rural high school: (1) Relationships and Community Drive Retention, (2) Positive School Climate and Stability Encourage Retention, (3) Servant and Responsive Leadership Practices, and (4) Teacher Voice, Feedback, and Hiring Practices Matter. Each theme reflects a combination of principal insights and established scholarship on teacher retention.

The first super theme, *Relationships and Community Drive Retention*, emphasizes the centrality of relationships and community in sustaining teacher commitment. The principal noted that teachers remain because of collegial bonds, supportive peer networks, and meaningful student-teacher connections. John stated, “I think they stay because they like the people they work with.” John also noted, “I think that you gotta like our kids. I think that’s important... but I know that teachers put each other first... I loved my little teaching group that I worked with... they were what kept me going. I love the teachers, and I love who I work with... I think that we all complement each other as far as our personalities goes.” He observed that faculty members value the sense of belonging cultivated within the school community, which creates a form of relational glue that encourages long-term service.

This finding reflects research demonstrating that teacher retention is strongly linked to relational trust and collegiality. Bryk and Schneider (2002) highlighted the role of relational trust between teachers, administrators, and students in shaping school effectiveness and staff commitment. Similarly, Ingersoll (2001) argued that collegial support is a stronger predictor of teacher retention than salary in many contexts. In rural settings, community ties play an even

more significant role, as teachers often share overlapping identities as educators, neighbors, and community members (Barley, 2009). The principal's account aligns with this research, underscoring that relationships and community embed teachers in ways that transcend financial or structural incentives.

The second super theme, *Positive School Climate and Stability Encourage Retention*, highlights the role of a safe and supportive school climate in teacher retention. The principal emphasized that teachers feel more secure and loyal when they perceive administrative backing, especially in matters of student discipline. John stated, "I think they feel safe now. I think that they know we support them. We try to take [student behavior burdens] off. ... We do our best to get there and support you." He also described morale-building activities, such as faculty kickball and basketball games, as strategies that strengthen community spirit and enjoyment. Furthermore, he noted that stability and comfort—teachers remaining in their "comfort zones"—contribute to a reluctance to leave.

Research supports this interpretation, as school climate has been repeatedly identified as a central factor influencing retention. Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) found that teachers are far more likely to remain in schools with positive working conditions, particularly when they perceive leadership as supportive. Boyd et al. (2011) similarly identified school safety and administrative support as critical predictors of teacher persistence. In rural contexts, stability and comfort may take on heightened importance, as teachers often weigh the risks of mobility against the security of familiar communities (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). The principal's perspective illustrates how climate and stability function together to create a workplace environment

conducive to teacher loyalty. Safety and climate may carry greater weight in rural schools, where teachers often lack access to extensive district-level support systems and rely heavily on school-based leadership for stability, conflict resolution, and professional consistency.

The third super theme, *Servant and Responsive Leadership Practices*, centers on the principal's belief that leadership practices—particularly those grounded in servant and transformational leadership—are essential for retention. He described modeling professionalism, respect, and tone for his staff while also engaging in hands-on support, such as covering classes and directly assisting teachers. John said, “As a leader, you treat people the way you want to be treated... each person leads through the lens that they learn best. . .I try to model the behavior... picking up trash, helping a student, covering a class.” He also emphasized fairness and transparency, noting that while he cannot make everyone happy, he strives to ensure consistency and justice in decision-making. These leadership qualities may be especially influential in rural settings, where principals typically maintain heightened visibility, assume multiple leadership roles, and operate in close relational proximity to both teachers and community members. This fosters conditions where leadership actions are felt more personally and directly shape retention decisions.

These practices align with the framework of servant leadership, which emphasizes the leader's role in serving and supporting their staff (Greenleaf, 1977). Research demonstrates that servant leadership in schools fosters stronger teacher morale, satisfaction, and trust (Crippen & Willows, 2019). Similarly, transformational leadership theory underscores the importance of modeling behaviors, inspiring commitment, and creating a shared vision for retention

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The principal's account illustrates a hybrid approach, blending servant leadership (through hands-on support and teacher protection) with transformational practices (through modeling professionalism and fairness), both of which strengthen teacher loyalty.

The fourth super theme, *Teacher Voice, Feedback, and Hiring Practices Matter*, underscores the importance of teacher voice and intentional hiring in building retention. "Feedback should drive your leadership," John said. "We're starting an advisory council... to gather suggestions and improve communication," stated John. Principal John explained that teachers are encouraged to contribute feedback through surveys, advisory councils, and department chair input, which are then used to shape schedules, morale activities, and school initiatives. He also noted that hiring decisions are rarely "cold hires," with a deliberate focus on cultural fit and alignment with school values.

This theme reflects research that emphasizes the significance of teacher agency in retention. Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2016) found that when teachers have a voice in school decision-making, they report greater job satisfaction and stronger commitment. Similarly, participative leadership and teacher empowerment have been shown to reduce attrition by fostering ownership and collective responsibility (Ingersoll, 2001). Recruitment practices also play a critical role: Boyd et al. (2011) argued that matching teachers to schools with compatible values and communities increases long-term retention. In rural schools, leveraging social networks and ensuring cultural fit are especially important given smaller applicant pools and the outsized role of community alignment (Monk, 2007).

Taken together, these four super themes suggest that teacher retention in this rural high school is not primarily a product of external incentives, but rather of relationships, school climate, leadership practices, and opportunities for teacher voice. The principal's insights reinforce broader scholarship demonstrating that relational trust, supportive leadership, and inclusive organizational practices are critical for sustaining teacher commitment. In rural settings, where financial resources are often limited, these relational and cultural factors become especially vital to maintaining high levels of teacher retention.

Figure 2 displays a clustered mind map of overlapping retention themes. This figure illustrates the interconnections among relationships, school climate, leadership support, and teacher voice, highlighting the cross-cutting nature of these drivers of retention across all three research questions.

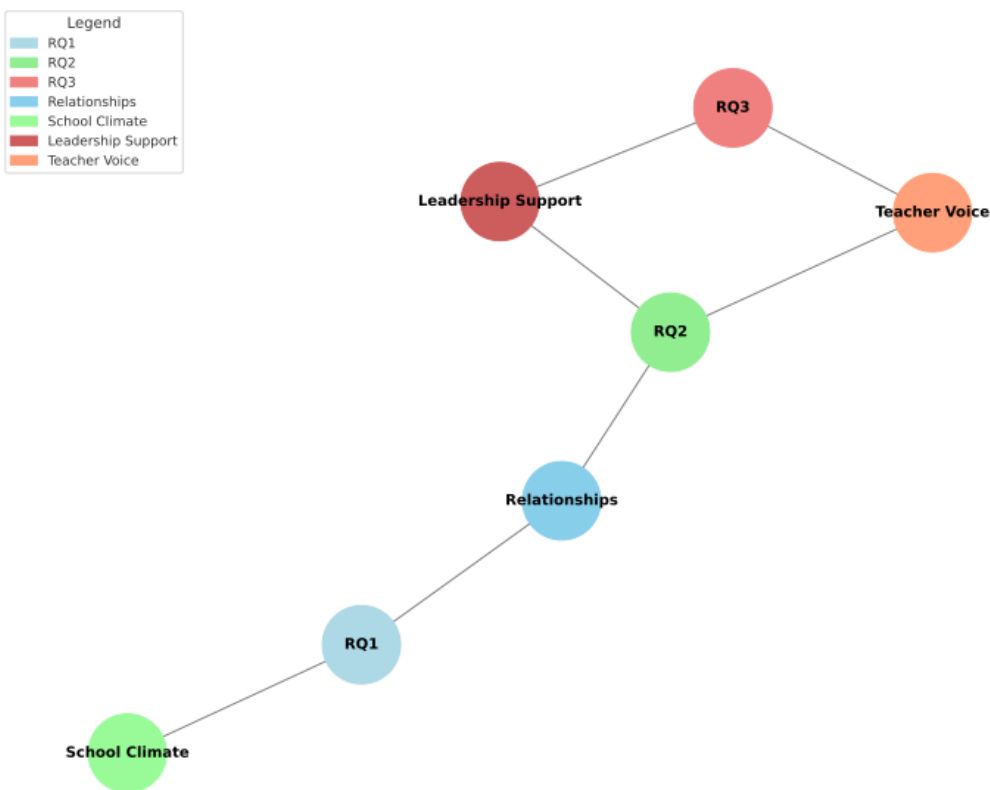


Figure 2. Clustered Mind Map of Overlapping Retention Themes

Figure 2 demonstrates that relationships, leadership support, and teacher voice are not isolated factors but shared drivers of retention that cut across multiple aspects of the school's culture and leadership practices.

While Table 4 presents detailed codes, Table 5 condenses these findings into four super themes: (1) Relationships and Community, (2) School Climate and Stability, (3) Servant and Responsive Leadership, and (4) Teacher Voice, Feedback, and Hiring Practices. These super themes capture the most salient factors identified by the principal and provide a framework for understanding the interconnected influences on teacher retention.

Table 5. Condensed Principal Coding with Four Super Themes

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Theories</i>	<i>Research Questions</i>
Collegial bonds, peer networks, student connections	Relationships and Community	Relationships and Community Drive Retention	Social Capital Theory; Relational-Cultural Theory	RQ1 RQ2
Safe environment, discipline support, morale events, comfort zones, fear of change	School Climate	Positive Climate and Comfort Encourage Retention	Organizational Climate Theory; Positive Organizational Scholarship; Organizational Commitment Theory	RQ1 RQ2
Modeling professionalism, respect, tone; covering classes; fairness and transparency	Leadership Practices	Servant Leadership and Responsive Leadership Build Trust	Servant Leadership Theory; Transformational Leadership; Social Learning Theory	RQ2 RQ3
Advisory councils, surveys, participatory input, intentional hiring, cultural fit	Teacher Empowerment	Teacher Voice, Feedback, and Hiring Practices Matter	Participative Leadership Theory; Leader-Member Exchange; Human Capital & Social Network Theory	RQ1 RQ3

Table 5 illustrates how the multiple codes and categories from the principal's interview converge into a smaller set of comprehensive themes that are directly linked to the research questions.

The second section of this chapter focuses on the perspectives of faculty members, whose experiences provide a complementary lens through which to understand retention. Teachers described how they perceive the principal's actions, the support they receive from leadership, and

the relational and cultural conditions that influence their decisions to stay. Their responses illuminate the practical realities of retention at the classroom level, offering rich detail on how leadership practices are experienced and interpreted by those most directly affected.

Teacher Interview Data Analysis

The analysis of teacher data revealed a set of recurring themes that contribute to teacher retention at the rural high school. While each teacher's narrative reflected unique experiences, their perspectives converged around four primary areas: (1) proximity and community ties, (2) positive school climate and collegial relationships, (3) supportive and approachable leadership, and (4) teacher voice and recognition. These findings highlighted in Table 6 illuminate the ways in which rural context, personal values, and school leadership interact to sustain teacher commitment.

Table 6. Condensed Coding of Teacher Interviews into Themes

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Condensed Themes</i>	<i>Research Question Alignment</i>
Proximity to home, family, and church; children's schools; ease of life	Place based motivations	Proximity and Community Ties: Teachers stay because of personal, familial, and community connections.	RQ1 RQ2
Friendships with colleagues; collegial bonds; family-like atmosphere	Peer relationships and collegiality	Positive School Climate and Collegial Relationships: Supportive peer networks and collaborative	RQ1 RQ2

		culture sustain retention.	
Safe and supportive environment; morale events (e.g., recognition weeks, Teacher of the Month); new school schedule	Organizational climate and morale	Supportive School Climate: Structured recognition and morale-building practices foster loyalty.	RQ1 RQ2
Approachable principal; open-door policy; principal “easy to talk to”	Leadership accessibility	Approachable and Supportive Leadership: Accessibility and relational trust in leadership encourage teachers to stay.	RQ2 RQ3
Feedback encouraged; climate committee; advisory input	Teacher participation and empowerment	Teacher Voice and Recognition: Teachers feel valued when their voices are heard and contributions recognized.	RQ2 RQ3
Professional respect; teacher recognition programs	Validation and recognition	Professional Validation: Recognition of effort and success strengthens organizational commitment.	RQ3

All eight teachers emphasized proximity as one of the most important factors influencing their decision to remain at the school. Many, such as Anna, Grace, Olivia, Jack, and Helen, specifically cited closeness to home, family, or church as central to their commitment. Grace wrote, “This is my home. My family has been here for over two hundred years. Besides that, I simply do not think I would be happy in an urban school setting.” Jack wrote, “It is my hometown. I wanted to be close to my family and church.” Others, like Drew and Matt,

connected proximity with broader community ties, suggesting that teachers remain because of the stability and familiarity the rural setting provides. Matt wrote in response to what the principal did to encourage teacher retention, “attempting to build positive school culture that enriches teachers’ experiences. . . sometimes you can tolerate lower pay if you are happy.” This emphasis reflects previous scholarship that highlights how rural educators often prioritize place-based factors over financial incentives when making career decisions (Barley, 2009; Tran & Smith, 2020). In rural regions, the desire to live and work near family is not only a personal preference but also a reflection of limited alternative employment hubs and the central role of schools in rural community life. Teachers’ emphasis on proximity in this study aligns with rural retention literature describing how deep-rooted ties to place strongly influence long-term commitment to rural schools.

Teachers also described the importance of working in a supportive and collegial environment. Grace and Eliza emphasized their friendships with colleagues, while Jack noted that strong peer relationships contribute to making the school an enjoyable place to work. Eliza noted, “I truly love my students and the friendships I have built with my colleagues. I am grateful for the opportunity to both teach and learn alongside them.” Several participants described the school as fostering a “family-like” atmosphere, with Olivia highlighting how this culture helps sustain teacher satisfaction. Collectively, these perspectives align with research showing that collegial support and positive climate are central to teacher persistence, often outweighing material disadvantages (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

Another strong theme across interviews was the role of the principal in creating conditions that support retention. Nearly every participant described the principal as approachable and open to communication. Drew repeatedly emphasized the principal's accessibility, while Eliza and Helen highlighted the value of his open-door policy. Drew wrote,

John is proactive when celebrating successes and achievements, both individually and corporately. He's done a great job establishing programs (like teacher and student recognition) that boost morale. It also let's everyone know that their efforts do not go unnoticed. He's accessible and approachable and takes a genuine interest in the concerns of others.

Teachers credited leadership with implementing morale-building initiatives such as the climate committee, Teacher of the Month recognition, and Teacher Appreciation Week activities. These efforts were seen as signals of respect and validation, consistent with scholarship on servant and transformational leadership, which underscores the importance of relational trust and leader accessibility in fostering teacher retention (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Teachers consistently noted that leadership encourages open communication and opportunities for feedback. Matt and Eliza, for example, emphasized that staff are asked to provide constructive input, while Helen described being encouraged to contribute ideas through the climate committee. Helen wrote, "The Climate Committee and Admin have been doing more in the last few years to do things for teachers. Our planning time has increased with a change to traditional block schedule." Teachers viewed these opportunities for voice not only as

mechanisms for school improvement but also as expressions of professional respect. This finding reflects research linking participative leadership and teacher empowerment with stronger organizational commitment and reduced turnover (Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016; Ingersoll, 2001). Recognition of teachers' efforts—both formal and informal—was also cited as a meaningful practice that reinforced loyalty to the school.

Taken together, the teacher perspectives reveal that retention in this rural high school is shaped less by compensation or benefits and more by relational, cultural, and leadership factors. Teachers remain because they are rooted in the community, supported by their colleagues, and led by an administration that fosters positive climate, open communication, and recognition of professional contributions. These findings affirm the importance of understanding teacher retention in rural schools through a relational and contextual lens, where community ties and leadership practices play a more significant role than financial considerations.

The next section synthesizes the perspectives of both the principal and faculty, identifying areas of convergence and divergence. Through thematic analysis, the findings were condensed into broader super themes that capture the most salient dimensions of teacher retention at this rural high school. This synthesis highlights the interconnectedness of relationships, school climate, leadership behaviors, and teacher agency, illustrating how these elements operate collectively to support high levels of teacher retention.

Integrated Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The perspectives of the principal and teachers at this rural high school converge on several key themes—proximity and community ties, positive school climate, supportive leadership, and teacher voice—while also diverging in emphasis based on role. Considered together, these findings provide a comprehensive understanding of teacher retention in a rural setting.

Research Question 1

In a rural high school with high teacher retention, what factors does the principal believe contribute to teachers staying at the school?

Analysis of Principal John’s interview revealed three central factors influencing teacher retention: community ties, school climate, and intentional hiring. The principal emphasized that many teachers remain because they are “deeply rooted in the community, with strong family and church connections.” This aligns with broader literature highlighting place-based identity as an important determinant of rural teacher commitment.

Principal John further pointed to the importance of maintaining a positive and supportive school climate, which he actively fostered through recognition and morale-building activities such as birthday celebrations, teacher appreciation events, and opportunities for collegial bonding. He described the school atmosphere as a “family-like environment” that motivates staff to stay even when surrounding districts offer higher pay.

Finally, Principal John identified intentional hiring practices as a proactive retention strategy. He explained that he sought teachers who “fit the culture” and who would contribute to collaboration and collegiality. This approach, in his view, has helped sustain long-term stability and reduced turnover. Taken together, the principal’s narrative suggests that retention is not tied to a single factor but emerges from cultivating a supportive and culturally aligned environment where teachers feel valued and respected. Table 7 highlights more specific responses from Principal John’s interview.

Table 7. Condensed Coding for Research Question 1

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
Proximity to home, family, and church; children’s schools; ease of life	Place based motivations	<p>John said, “being able to come back here, to the school system where I started and where I went through and after being away for almost 10 years was beneficial.”</p> <p>“When I took the job, a lot of people, they doubted I could do things, or I could lead things the right way. I wanted to prove that I've learned a lot, and I wanted to come back and make this the best school, one of the best schools in State of Tennessee.”</p> <p>“For the majority, it is their hometown school. They live here. They love Warren County High School. They went either to this school or the old school. We have a lot, if we went down our list of teachers that we have, that are homegrown. They feel that connection, the need to give back to their community because the school helped them. They feel the need to help the school in their community and the kids back because they have that love for this county.”</p>

<p>Friendships with colleagues; collegial bonds; family-like atmosphere</p>	<p>Peer relationships and collegiality</p>	<p>“I mean, you know, realistically, my job is to put the best professional people in front of our students every day that want to lead and want to work together and do those things.”</p> <p>“I want to make sure this is a good place for my students, but also for my teachers. I want to have a great work environment where you're safe and you're happy to come here and teach.”</p>
<p>Safe and supportive environment; morale events (e.g., recognition weeks, Teacher of the Month); new school schedule</p>	<p>Organizational climate and morale</p>	<p>John states, “I'm very privileged to be a principal. I was privileged to be a teacher. You know, it's the most powerful position in the world. Again, my expectation for this school is high, and I expect my teachers to have those high expectations in their classroom. And the only thing I've asked them for years here, I just want you to teach. Go teach. Enjoy it. Have fun. I'll take care of the parents, the data, and all this.”</p> <p>“I had to build culture here.”</p> <p>“There's going to be days where I might show up with sausage and biscuit from Hardees. Just for them being here. I do thank you. I put notes in their mailboxes. I do the cards. It's those little things. I think about these things because one of my former teachers. She always told me, never forget where you came from. If you want to be a good principal, never forget where you come from.”</p>

From the principal’s perspective, several core factors drive retention. While he acknowledged the role of proximity and personal ties, he emphasized the importance of school climate and cultural fit as central reasons teachers remain. He identified safety, supportive discipline, morale-building activities, and intentional hiring practices as structural elements that

create stability and encourage long-term commitment. The principal also viewed teacher recognition and open communication as essential strategies, aligning with transformational and servant leadership theories that stress trust, fairness, and respect.

Research Question 2

In a rural high school with high teacher retention, how does the faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention?

Faculty responses confirmed that the principal's actions were both visible and meaningful, particularly in relation to approachability, recognition, and climate. Teachers consistently described the principal as "approachable and easy to talk to," noting that they felt comfortable raising concerns in both formal and informal ways.

Teachers further emphasized the value of recognition programs and climate initiatives, such as the climate committee and morale-building activities. One teacher explained, "He's proactive when celebrating successes and achievements, both individually and corporately." Another commented that the committee helped "make people feel welcome and motivated to stay." These initiatives were perceived as effective mechanisms for reinforcing morale and cultivating belonging.

Additionally, teachers highlighted the principal's role in discipline support, reporting that they felt "backed up" when handling student behavior issues. This reduced stress and reinforced trust in administrative leadership. However, some faculty also acknowledged financial

disparities compared to surrounding districts, noting that while the principal's efforts improved their experience, retention decisions were still influenced by broader economic realities.

Table 8. Condensed Coding for Research Question 2

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
Proximity to home, family, and church; children's schools; ease of life	Place based motivations	<p>Olivia said, "Proximity to my house, knowing employees, and wanting to work in the same community that I was living. Plus, my son was in the same school system."</p> <p>"It is close to home. Due to family obligations and the location of my spouse's job, it would not be feasible to move. I currently do not want to drive to another county because I need to be fairly close to home in case of an emergency," stated Helen.</p> <p>Jack said, "It is in my hometown. I wanted to be close to my family and church."</p>
Friendships with colleagues; collegial bonds; family-like atmosphere	Peer relationships and collegiality	<p>Eliza said, "I have worked here longer than any other job in my adult life. I truly love my students and the friendships I have built with my colleagues. I am grateful for the opportunity to both teach and learn alongside them."</p> <p>Drew states, "I have a delightful rapport with Admin, Faculty and students."</p> <p>"I have a lot of friends who work here that I have known or many years. I have also made many additional friends since I got</p>

		<p>here. I feel supported by the principals and staff, as well as the director of schools and the school board, which are all huge advantages,” states Grace.</p>
<p>Safe and supportive environment; morale events (e.g., recognition weeks, Teacher of the Month); new school schedule</p>	<p>Organizational climate and morale</p>	<p>Jack said, “The principal tries to support the teachers with parents, when appropriate.”</p> <p>Grace said, “He is always open to listening to my concerns, and he takes action when necessary.”</p> <p>“Our principal is a great leader to work for. He provides freedom while also maintaining rules and consistency, which creates a healthy and supportive working environment,” Eliza said.</p> <p>Anna said, “I think the principal has tried in the past couple of years to create a climate committee and do things to help motivate people to stay and feel welcome (birthday cake, jeans day, etc.).”</p>
<p>Approachable principal; open-door policy; principal “easy to talk to”</p>	<p>Leadership accessibility</p>	<p>Anna said, “As a veteran teacher, I do try to express my concerns when I have them too. I hope that he would encourage every teacher to do so. I am not sure that we are always asked about certain things but if you keep that door of communication open, things will work much smoother.”</p> <p>Grace said, “I’m sure he does a lot that I am unaware of. He wants to have a friendly</p>

		demeanor. He creates a family type atmosphere. He has teacher morale activities. He has a climate committee to help him determine if teachers or students are upset.”
Feedback encouraged; climate committee; advisory input	Teacher participation and empowerment	Grace said, “The principal does encourage teachers to come talk to him if they have any issues. I feel that if I spoke with the principal about issues, he would be supportive about 80% of the time.”

Faculty accounts reflected strong alignment with the principal’s intended practices. Teachers described the principal as approachable and accessible, noting his use of recognition programs, morale initiatives, and the climate committee to improve workplace culture. Teachers also emphasized that they felt encouraged to provide feedback through both formal and informal channels, perceiving these opportunities as signs of professional respect. Importantly, teachers confirmed that leadership actions—open communication, recognition, and support—were instrumental in creating the family-like atmosphere and positive climate they associated with retention.

Research Question 3

In what ways does the principal encourage teacher retention at this rural high school?

The data from both Principal John and the teacher’s interviewed revealed multiple strategies used to intentionally foster retention. Recognition programs such as teacher of the

month and public acknowledgment of accomplishments were cited by teachers as key practices that demonstrated their “efforts do not go unnoticed.”

Another consistent theme was teacher voice and participation. Teachers reported that they were encouraged to give feedback through end-of-year surveys, the climate committee, and informal conversations. As one teacher noted, Principal John “encourages honest and constructive feedback” and uses it to identify “areas that could use improvement.”

Finally, Principal John’s commitment to relationship-building and trust was recognized by faculty as central to their retention. Teachers described him as “accessible” and “genuinely interested in the concerns of others.” These practices not only contributed to a supportive work environment but also created a sense of professional belonging where teachers felt valued as contributors to the school’s direction.

Table 9. Condensed Coding for Research Question 3

<i>Initial Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
Approachable principal; open-door policy; principal “easy to talk to”	Leadership accessibility	<p>Eliza said, “The executive principal supports retention by maintaining a true open-door policy, encouraging communication, recognizing teachers’ work, supporting professional development, and fostering a positive culture.”</p> <p>Drew said, “Admin has always been very supportive as I have tried new and different teaching techniques and student engagement. There are times when the principal is forced to hire whoever is available to fill a position, but I think he has been</p>

		very intentional to hire instructors who are competent, team players and play well with others.”
Feedback encouraged; climate committee; advisory input	Teacher participation and empowerment	When asked what kind of feedback was encouraged, Matt responded, “Honest and constructive feedback that will help the principal get a feel for areas that could use improvement.”
Professional respect; teacher recognition programs	Validation and recognition	<p>“By attempting to build a positive school culture that enriches teachers' experiences. Sometimes you can tolerate lower pay if you are happy,” Matt said.</p> <p>Helen said, “The Climate Committee and Admin have been doing more in the last few years to do things for teachers. Examples include Teacher of the Month or Teacher of the Quarter awards, recognizing exceptional new teachers, there are times that Admin sets up a table with things for teachers, and our planning time has increased with a change to a traditional block schedule.”</p>

Both the principal and faculty perspectives demonstrate that leadership practices play a direct role in retention. The principal explicitly framed his actions as strategies to build trust, fairness, and professional respect through advisory councils, surveys, recognition efforts, and morale-building events. Teachers confirmed the effectiveness of these strategies, noting that the principal’s accessibility and responsiveness encouraged them to remain at the school despite

financial disadvantages relative to neighboring districts. These findings suggest that leadership practices emphasizing participation, recognition, and a positive culture directly contribute to sustaining teacher commitment.

Synthesis Across Questions

Together, the findings reveal that teacher retention in this rural high school is shaped by both personal place-based factors (proximity and community ties) and organizational conditions fostered by leadership (positive climate, recognition, teacher voice, and supportive relationships). Teachers placed the greatest weight on proximity to family and community as their primary motivator, while the principal emphasized climate and intentional hiring as long-term retention strategies. Despite these nuanced differences, both perspectives converge on the importance of school culture and leadership practices in sustaining a committed and stable faculty.

Table 10. Integrated Findings Aligned to Research Questions

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Principal Perspective</i>	<i>Teacher Perspective</i>	<i>Integrated Theme (s)</i>
RQ1: In a rural high school with high teacher retention, what factors does the principal believe contribute to teachers staying at the school?	Emphasizes school climate and cultural fit; highlights safety, supportive discipline, morale events, intentional hiring; values recognition and communication.	Teachers acknowledge climate but emphasize proximity to home, family, and community ties as the strongest motivator.	Proximity and Community Ties; Positive School Climate and Collegial Relationships
RQ2: In a rural high	Principal frames actions as	Teachers confirm leadership	Supportive and Approachable

school with high teacher retention, how does the faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention?	deliberate strategies— advisory councils, surveys, recognition programs, morale-building efforts.	as approachable, accessible, and supportive; highlight recognition (e.g., Teacher of the Month, climate committee) and opportunities for feedback.	Leadership; Teacher Voice and Recognition
RQ3: In what ways does the principal encourage teacher retention at this rural high school?	Uses open-door policy, recognition initiatives, intentional morale-building, and participative leadership to sustain commitment.	Teachers emphasize that these actions— open communication, recognition, climate initiatives— encourage them to remain despite lower pay compared to surrounding districts.	Teacher Voice and Recognition; Supportive and Approachable Leadership

Table 7 demonstrates that while teachers stress proximity and community ties as their primary motivator for remaining, the principal highlights intentional leadership strategies and climate-building efforts as central to retention. Both perspectives converge on the importance of school climate, supportive leadership, recognition, and teacher voice, illustrating how relational and organizational conditions sustain teacher commitment in a rural context.

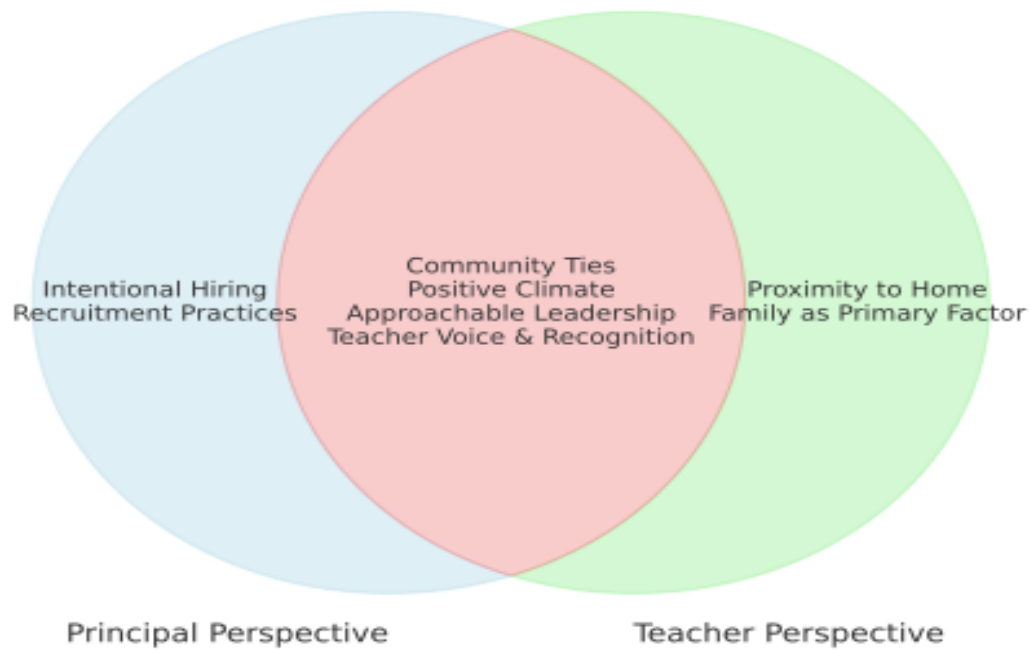


Figure 3. Overlap of Principal and Teacher Perspectives on Teacher Retention

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative case study reveal that teacher retention in this rural high school is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, relational, and organizational factors. Analysis of principal and teacher perspectives highlighted four central themes: proximity and community ties, positive school climate and collegial relationships, supportive and approachable leadership, and teacher voice and recognition. Together, these themes provide a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that encourage teachers to remain in rural schools.

In relation to RQ1, the principal emphasized intentional strategies such as maintaining a positive and safe school climate, supporting teacher morale through recognition and celebrations, and hiring teachers who align with the cultural values of the school community. These insights demonstrate that leadership practices aimed at strengthening school culture are seen as critical for retention.

With respect to RQ2, the teachers' perspectives confirmed that leadership actions are both visible and meaningful. Teachers described the principal as approachable, accessible, and responsive, and they pointed to climate-building initiatives—such as the climate committee and recognition programs—as effective in reinforcing morale. Teachers also underscored the value of collegial relationships and a “family-like” atmosphere, suggesting that supportive peer networks combine with leadership practices to sustain their commitment.

Finally, in answering RQ3, both the principal and faculty identified specific ways leadership encourages retention. Open communication, participative decision-making, recognition of teacher contributions, and the creation of opportunities for feedback emerged as consistent practices that foster a sense of belonging and professional respect. Teachers confirmed that these practices, coupled with strong community ties, outweighed the financial incentives offered by surrounding districts. This is particularly notable in a rural context where financial incentives are often less competitive than those offered in nearby suburban districts. Yet, as the findings show, relational bonds, community interdependence, and a stable school climate compensate for salary limitations and help sustain teacher commitment.

Overall, the findings reveal a strong convergence between the principal's leadership strategies and the faculty's lived experiences, while also highlighting subtle differences in emphasis. Teachers consistently framed proximity to family and community as their primary motivator, while the principal placed stronger weight on climate and intentional hiring. Despite these differences, both perspectives affirm that retention in rural schools cannot be explained by financial considerations alone. Instead, it is sustained through relationships, supportive leadership, and community connectedness.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of rural teacher retention and provide important insights for leaders in similar contexts. Chapter V will build on these themes by discussing the implications for practice, recommendations for policy, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The findings in Chapter IV demonstrated that teacher retention in this rural high school is shaped by interconnected personal, relational, and organizational factors. Chapter V extends this analysis by situating the themes within the broader literature on rural teacher retention, examining both areas of convergence and divergence, and identifying practical and policy implications. Prior research has shown that rural teachers often remain in their positions due to strong community ties and proximity to family (Barley, 2009; Tran & Smith, 2020), while positive school climate and collegial relationships have been linked to improved teacher satisfaction and reduced turnover (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Leadership practices that emphasize support, recognition, and teacher voice have also been found to play a critical role in fostering organizational commitment (Ingersoll, 2001; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). The current study reinforces these findings while offering new insights into how principal leadership and teacher perspectives converge to shape a culture of stability within a rural school context.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the principal's perceptions of his influence on teacher retention in a rural high school in Middle Tennessee, as well as to examine how teachers at the same school perceived the principal's actions and beliefs. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview with the principal and questionnaires completed by eight teachers, providing multiple perspectives on the factors that shape teacher retention in a rural context. The findings highlighted the complex interplay between personal, relational, and organizational influences, particularly the role of leadership practices in fostering commitment. Building on these results, this chapter offers an interpretation of the study's conclusions,

discusses implications for practice and policy, provides recommendations for school leaders, and acknowledges the limitations of the study.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this case study highlight how teacher retention in a rural high school is shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, and organizational factors. The principal and teachers emphasized overlapping themes of personal relationships / community, school climate, leadership, and teacher voice, while offering unique emphases based on their roles. The following sections interpret the four super themes considering prior research and theoretical frameworks.

Community and Place

The strongest factor identified by teachers was proximity to home and family. Participants such as Anna, Grace, Olivia, and Jack highlighted their ability to live and work near family and remain embedded in their communities as the primary reason for continuing at the school. The principal also acknowledged this factor, though he emphasized cultural fit and community values as essential to long-term stability.

This finding aligns with existing research, which suggests that rural teacher retention is strongly influenced by place-based loyalty and the integration of professional and personal lives (Barley, 2009; Tran & Smith, 2020). Unlike urban and suburban districts where career mobility may be more common, rural teachers are often deeply rooted in their communities, creating strong bonds that outweigh financial incentives from surrounding districts.

Climate and Leadership

Another prominent theme was the role of leadership in creating and maintaining a positive school climate. Teachers described the principal as approachable, supportive, and consistent in fostering a “family-like” environment. Initiatives such as the climate committee, recognition weeks, and new scheduling structures were noted as meaningful contributions to morale. The principal emphasized the importance of discipline support, safety, and structured recognition to ensure fairness and belonging.

This theme is consistent with organizational climate literature, which links supportive and collegial environments to stronger teacher commitment and reduced turnover (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). The convergence of principal and teacher perspectives underscores the importance of leadership practices that balance relational trust with structural supports to sustain teacher satisfaction.

Teacher Voice and Recognition

Teachers consistently identified voice and recognition as significant factors in their retention. Participants described opportunities to provide feedback through advisory councils, climate committees, and informal dialogue with the principal. They valued recognition programs such as “Teacher of the Month,” which validated their efforts and reinforced a sense of professional respect. The principal confirmed these practices, explaining that they were deliberate strategies to engage faculty and build morale.

This theme reflects participative leadership frameworks, which emphasize shared decision-making, empowerment, and recognition as central to organizational commitment (Ingersoll, 2001; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). Teachers' perceptions suggest that when their voices are heard and their contributions valued, they are more likely to remain invested in the school community.

Professional Belonging and Collegiality

Finally, collegiality emerged as a critical aspect of retention. Teachers described strong friendships, supportive peer networks, and a family-like atmosphere as reasons for their continued service. The principal similarly emphasized the role of collegial trust and respect as cultural anchors within the school.

This finding supports theories of relational trust and social capital in education, which highlight the importance of interpersonal connections in fostering resilience and professional commitment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In this rural context, collegial bonds not only enhance daily work satisfaction but also contribute to long-term stability by embedding teachers in a supportive professional community.

Connection of Emerging Themes to Existing Literature

The themes that emerged from this study—community and place, leadership and climate, teacher voice and recognition, and professional belonging and collegiality—not only describe the lived experiences of participants but also align closely with existing scholarship on teacher

retention in rural contexts. By situating the findings within the broader literature, the results highlight both points of convergence and areas where this study extends current understanding.

Community and Place

Teachers consistently emphasized proximity to family, home, and community ties as the strongest motivator for remaining in the school. This finding mirrors prior research suggesting that rural teachers often prioritize personal and community connections over financial incentives (Barley, 2009; Tran & Smith, 2020). Unlike urban districts where mobility is more feasible, rural teachers frequently describe their professional stability as intertwined with community identity. The current study reinforces this perspective while adding nuance by showing how principals also recognize community ties but frame them through the lens of cultural fit and hiring practices.

Leadership and Climate

A second major theme, the influence of leadership on school climate, strongly reflects existing scholarship linking positive work environments with reduced turnover. Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) found that supportive working conditions significantly influence teacher satisfaction and persistence. Similarly, research on transformational leadership highlights how principals who create safe, consistent, and morale-focused environments enhance retention (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The present findings extend this literature by illustrating how teachers and the principal converge in viewing climate as central, though teachers emphasized

relational aspects while the principal stressed structural supports such as discipline and recognition initiatives.

Teacher Voice and Recognition

The role of teacher voice and recognition emerged as a third critical factor. Teachers valued opportunities to provide feedback and participate in decision-making, a finding consistent with participative leadership research showing that shared governance fosters commitment and reduces attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). Recognition programs, such as “Teacher of the Month,” were also seen as meaningful, aligning with organizational studies emphasizing the motivational role of acknowledgment and validation. This study contributes further evidence that participatory practices and recognition strategies are particularly salient in rural schools, where strong interpersonal ties amplify their impact.

Professional Belonging and Collegiality

Finally, professional belonging and collegiality were central to teachers’ decisions to stay. Participants described the school culture as “family-like,” highlighting the importance of peer support networks and interpersonal trust. This finding resonates with Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) work on relational trust, which underscores the significance of collegial bonds in sustaining effective schools. Prior literature has often focused on administrative leadership as a driver of retention; this study contributes by showing how peer-to-peer relationships function as an equally powerful factor in rural teacher persistence. Table 8 shows the connection of emerging themes to existing literature.

Table 11. Connection of Emerging Themes to Existing Literature

Theme	Supporting Literature
Community and Place	Barley (2009); Tran & Smith (2020)
Leadership and Climate	Johnson, Kraft, & Papay (2012); Leithwood & Jantzi (2005)
Teacher Voice & Recognition	Ingersoll (2001); Kraft, Marinell, & Yee (2016)
Professional Belonging & Collegiality	Bryk & Schneider (2002)

Taken together, these connections to existing literature demonstrate that the findings of this study are both consistent with and additive to prior research. While rural teacher retention has often been explained in terms of location and compensation, this study underscores the relational and organizational dimensions—climate, leadership, recognition, and belonging—that sustain teacher commitment in a rural high school.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight several practical implications for principals, teachers, and district leaders who work directly in rural schools. Beyond policy considerations, the results underscore the day-to-day practices that foster teacher commitment, including open communication, recognition, professional belonging, and strong community ties. By focusing on these relational and cultural factors, school leaders can create supportive environments where teachers feel valued and connected. These practices, when sustained, play a critical role in reducing turnover and strengthening the long-term stability of rural schools.

For Principals and School Leaders

Open communication emerged as a critical factor in teacher retention, underscoring the importance of approachable leadership. Teachers consistently emphasized that they valued leaders who were accessible and willing to listen. When principals created opportunities for both formal and informal dialogue, faculty felt empowered to share their concerns and ideas. Encouraging teacher feedback not only fostered trust but also provided administrators with valuable insight into the realities of classroom practice. In this way, communication was not simply about exchanging information but about building a culture of mutual respect and collaboration that supported long-term teacher commitment. This directly addresses RQ3, which asked how principals encourage teacher retention, by illustrating that approachable leadership and participative decision-making are vital. Prior research supports this finding with Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrating that relational trust between leaders and teachers significantly predicts school stability.

Recognition also played an essential role in validating teachers' contributions and reinforcing their sense of belonging. Structured initiatives, such as morale committees, teacher appreciation events, and programs like "teacher of the month," were consistently identified as meaningful practices. These efforts demonstrated that teacher work was noticed and valued beyond evaluation metrics, helping to maintain morale and motivation. Faculty explained that recognition encouraged them to persist in their roles, even when challenges such as workload or financial disparities were present. The importance of recognition aligns with RQ2, which explored how faculty perceive the principal's actions in supporting teacher retention. Teachers

viewed these recognition initiatives as visible, tangible evidence of leadership's investment in their success. This resonates with Johnson, Kraft, and Papay's (2012) argument that recognition and positive working conditions are critical for keeping teachers in schools, particularly in challenging contexts.

Equally important was the cultivation of a positive school climate, which depended on balancing discipline support with relational trust and community-building activities. Teachers noted that feeling "backed up" by administrators when addressing student behavior created a sense of security and reduced stress. At the same time, community-building events—such as school-wide celebrations, birthday recognitions, and informal social opportunities—strengthened collegial bonds. This balance between professional support and relational trust contributed to a workplace environment where teachers felt both respected and connected. The principal also identified climate as a central factor influencing retention, addressing RQ1 regarding the factors the principal believed contributed to teacher stability. These findings echo Ingersoll's (2001) organizational analysis, which concluded that retention is strongly influenced by school climate and collegial support rather than pay alone, as well as Gu and Day's (2006) emphasis on the role of resilience fostered by supportive environments.

Open communication, recognition, and school climate functioned as interconnected elements of retention. Teachers remained committed when they felt heard, valued, and supported in their daily practice. Leaders who intentionally fostered these conditions created schools where educators not only stayed but thrived, highlighting that retention is less about financial incentives and more about cultivating a culture of respect, belonging, and professional trust. Together, these

findings across RQ1–RQ3 illustrate that both leadership strategies and teacher perceptions converge on the importance of communication, recognition, and climate in sustaining teacher retention in rural schools. These results extend earlier work on organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 2001) and reinforce recent studies emphasizing that teacher retention in rural schools is most strongly sustained through relationships, leadership, and community (Seelig, 2021; Flores & Shuls, 2024).

For Rural Districts

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for policy and practice in rural schools seeking to strengthen teacher retention. Two key strategies emerged from both principal and teacher perspectives: supporting climate-building initiatives and encouraging intentional hiring practices that prioritize cultural fit and community engagement.

First, the data highlight the need for sustained district and state-level support for climate-building initiatives. Teachers consistently reported that recognition programs, morale committees, and celebrations meaningfully shaped their decision to remain at the school. One teacher explained, *“The climate committee has made a great effort in improving morale. Things like teacher of the month and recognition during teacher appreciation week make us feel valued.”* The principal similarly emphasized that professional development, recognition opportunities, and staff celebrations were not optional but essential components of a supportive school culture. These findings reinforce Johnson, Kraft, and Papay’s (2012) conclusion that positive working conditions strongly predict teacher retention. Thus, school leaders should be

provided with adequate resources, autonomy, and structural support to implement initiatives that build collegial trust and foster a sense of belonging.

Second, the study underscores the importance of intentional hiring practices that prioritize cultural alignment and community engagement. The principal emphasized the importance of hiring teachers who would “fit the culture” and “play well with others,” while teachers described the school environment as feeling like “family,” noting that this cohesion contributed to their long-term commitment. These findings align with Ingersoll’s (2001) framing of retention as an organizational issue and Seelig’s (2021) observation that teacher longevity in rural contexts is strongly tied to cultural and community fit rather than financial incentives. District policies that encourage hiring practices centered on cultural alignment and relational capacity can ensure that new faculty members are well-suited for the rural school environment, thereby improving long-term stability.

Taken together, these implications suggest that teacher retention in rural schools is best supported not only through financial considerations but also through policies that empower principals to create strong school climates and strategically hire for cultural fit. Providing resources for recognition programs, morale-building efforts, and professional development—along with guidance for intentional recruitment—will enable rural schools to create conditions where teachers feel valued, respected, and connected.

For Teacher Development

A further implication of this study is the importance of promoting professional belonging through mentoring, collaboration, and leadership opportunities for teachers. Teachers described their sense of belonging as central to their decision to remain at the school. Several faculty members referenced the collegial and family-like atmosphere, with one noting, *“Most of us stay here because this feels like family—it matters that the principal hires people who share those values.”* This sense of professional belonging was not only fostered through hiring practices but also through opportunities to collaborate, mentor new teachers, and assume leadership roles within the school. Gu and Day (2006) similarly argued that resilience and long-term teacher commitment are sustained when educators feel professionally valued and connected. Providing intentional structures for collaboration, such as peer-mentoring systems, teacher-led committees, and professional learning communities, can deepen teachers’ sense of professional identity and strengthen retention in rural schools.

In addition, the findings underscore the value of ongoing support for extracurricular and community-based activities that strengthen teacher-student and teacher-community relationships. Teachers and the principal both emphasized the importance of strong relational ties as a reason for remaining in the school. For example, one participant stated, *“I keep coming back every year because of the kids—seeing their growth makes it worthwhile.”* Another highlighted the significance of extracurricular involvement, explaining that activities such as sponsoring student clubs and organizing community events allowed teachers to form meaningful bonds with students and families. Research supports this perspective, with Flores and Shuls (2024) noting

that teacher retention in rural areas is strongly associated with the degree of integration into the local community. By investing in extracurricular programming and community partnerships, districts can provide teachers with avenues to extend their influence beyond the classroom, fostering deeper connections that enhance satisfaction and encourage long-term commitment.

Table 12. Implications for Practice

Implication	Description	Connection to Findings
Foster Open Communication	Encourage principals to maintain approachable leadership styles, with regular feedback channels for teachers.	Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of being able to voice concerns directly to leadership, with the principal's open-door policy cited as a retention factor.
Recognition and Morale Programs	Implement structured initiatives (e.g., morale committees, teacher appreciation, recognition events) to validate teacher contributions.	Both principal and teachers described recognition programs (e.g., "Teacher of the Month") and morale-building celebrations as important in creating a positive climate.
Positive School Climate	Support principals in balancing discipline systems with relational trust and community-building activities.	Participants highlighted the climate committee, celebrations, and approachable leadership as elements reinforcing a "family-like" atmosphere.
Intentional Hiring Practices	Prioritize recruitment strategies that emphasize cultural fit, commitment to community, and long-term stability.	The principal stressed the role of hiring teachers who align with community values and school culture to ensure retention.
Professional Belonging	Promote mentoring, collaboration, and leadership opportunities that strengthen teachers' sense of belonging.	Teachers described collegial relationships and leadership opportunities as reasons they feel supported and remain committed.

Extracurricular and Community Engagement	Provide ongoing support for extracurricular and community-based activities that connect teachers, students, and families.	Teachers credited their involvement in student clubs, travel, and community events as central to their long-term commitment.
--	---	--

Together, these findings as shown in Table 9 highlight that professional belonging and community integration are not peripheral to teacher retention but foundational. Mentorship, leadership opportunities, and extracurricular engagement all serve to root teachers more firmly in their schools and communities, reinforcing both professional identity and personal connection. These practices confirm prior scholarship emphasizing that retention is most effectively sustained through strong relational and organizational supports (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Johnson et al., 2012), while also extending understanding of how these factors operate within rural contexts.

Implications for Policy

The results of this study carry several important implications for policymakers at the district and state levels who are concerned with sustaining teacher retention in rural schools. While salary remains an important factor, the findings indicate that teacher persistence is shaped as much by school climate, leadership, and community connections as by financial incentives. Policies that focus solely on compensation risk overlooking these broader influences. Therefore, effective rural retention policies must integrate financial, cultural, and leadership strategies to ensure both teacher stability and student success.

Addressing Compensation Inequities

Teachers in this study repeatedly acknowledged that salaries in their district were lower than those in surrounding areas. One participant noted, *“It is hard to compete with other districts when they pay more, but most of us stay here because of the climate and community.”* While this reflects the power of cultural and relational factors, it also underscores inequities that, if left unaddressed, may eventually erode teacher commitment. Recent initiatives in Tennessee, such as the planned increase in minimum teacher salaries to \$50,000 by 2026, represent important progress. However, rural districts often face additional fiscal challenges that make it difficult to match offers from larger systems. Policymakers might consider targeted measures such as state-funded stipends, rural teacher loan forgiveness programs, or housing allowances to make rural placements more competitive while still recognizing that compensation alone will not solve retention.

Investing in Leadership Development

Findings from this study highlighted the central role of the principal in fostering conditions that support retention. Teachers described their principal as “approachable,” “supportive,” and proactive in celebrating teacher achievements. These attributes suggest that leadership style directly shapes teacher satisfaction and persistence. Policy efforts should therefore expand principal preparation and development programs to emphasize participative leadership, climate-building, and community engagement alongside instructional management. For example, Tennessee’s Transformational Leadership Alliance (TLA) provides one model for developing rural principals with the skills to strengthen culture and morale. Expanding such

programs, or replicating them in other states, could enhance rural leadership pipelines and support principals in sustaining high levels of teacher commitment.

Strengthening Rural School Support

Policies should also provide dedicated resources for morale and professional growth initiatives in rural schools. Both teachers and the principal in this study pointed to recognition programs such as *teacher of the month* and morale committees as important contributors to retention. Yet, many rural schools rely on limited local budgets to sustain such efforts. State and district-level grants, similar in design to Title II, Part A but earmarked specifically for rural schools, could support initiatives like wellness programs, morale events, or collaborative professional learning. By providing structured funding, policymakers can ensure that these supports do not depend solely on the resourcefulness of individual leaders.

Community-Centered Approaches

Finally, the study reinforces the significance of community ties in teacher decision-making. Teachers consistently cited proximity to family, church, and local networks as their primary reason for staying. One teacher remarked, “*Most of us stay here because this feels like family—it matters that the principal hires people who share those values.*” Policymakers can build on this foundation by supporting programs that integrate teachers into community life. North Carolina’s Teaching Fellows program, for instance, recruits educators with a commitment to service and embeds them in local communities through leadership opportunities and partnerships. Rural-focused policies could also include community partnership grants, housing incentives, or

pipeline agreements with local universities to strengthen teacher-community bonds and increase long-term stability.

Table 13. Implications for Policy

Implication	Description	Connection to Findings
Addressing Compensation Inequalities	Develop district and state policies to reduce pay disparities between rural and surrounding districts while acknowledging that financial incentives alone are insufficient.	Teachers acknowledged lower salaries but emphasized they stay because of culture, climate, and leadership. Retention cannot rest solely on financial solutions.
Leadership Development	Invest in principal preparation and ongoing professional learning that emphasizes participative leadership, recognition, and building relational trust.	Teachers described the principal as approachable and supportive, while the principal emphasized intentional strategies such as recognition and morale-building.
Strengthening Rural School Support	Provide resources for climate-building initiatives, teacher recognition, and professional growth opportunities.	Both principal and teachers highlighted morale committees, teacher appreciation programs, and PD as critical retention supports.
Community Centered Approaches	Support policies that strengthen school-community partnerships and encourage teacher engagement in local culture and activities.	Teachers cited proximity to home, community ties, and extracurricular involvement as central to their decision to stay.

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that policies designed to improve rural teacher retention must go beyond financial adjustments. While addressing compensation inequities is necessary, it is equally important to invest in leadership development, provide dedicated support for climate-building, and reinforce teachers' community connections. Real-world examples from Tennessee and other states demonstrate that such strategies are both feasible and impactful. By

adopting a comprehensive, multi-dimensional policy approach, districts and states can create environments where teachers not only choose rural schools but also remain committed to them over time.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this study provides important insights into the factors influencing teacher retention in a rural high school, additional research is needed to extend and refine these findings. Several recommendations for future inquiry are proposed to strengthen the knowledge base and to guide future scholarship and practice.

Replication Across Rural Contexts

Because this case study was conducted at a single rural high school in Middle Tennessee, replication across multiple rural schools in diverse geographic areas is warranted. Such studies could test whether the themes identified here—community ties, supportive leadership, and collegiality—hold consistent across different rural contexts. They might also reveal important variation within rural schools themselves, as factors such as regional economic conditions, population shifts, and resource allocation differ between the Appalachian region, the rural Midwest, and the rural South.

Comparative Studies

Comparative research between rural, suburban, and urban schools would further illuminate the degree to which teacher retention factors are context-specific. This line of inquiry

could help clarify whether proximity and community ties are uniquely powerful in rural contexts or whether they also emerge in other educational settings. Moreover, comparative findings may reveal opportunities for districts in suburban or urban areas to adapt relational practices common in rural schools to strengthen their own retention efforts.

Longitudinal Research

A longitudinal design would offer insight into how teacher perceptions of leadership, school climate, and community ties evolve over time. Tracking educators throughout their careers could reveal the dynamic nature of retention factors and distinguish between influences that impact short-term satisfaction versus those that shape long-term commitment. Longitudinal research could also assess the cumulative effects of principal leadership strategies on retention outcomes across multiple years.

Mixed-Methods Approaches

Employing mixed methods designs that integrate qualitative inquiry with quantitative data on teacher turnover and retention rates would enhance the evidence base. Surveys of larger populations could complement in-depth case studies, testing the broader applicability of themes such as professional recognition and belonging. Large-scale datasets might also be used to investigate correlations between rural leadership practices and measurable outcomes such as turnover rates, teacher efficacy, student achievement, or community engagement.

Focused Studies on Leadership Practices

Future research could examine more closely the specific leadership practices that directly influence teacher morale and retention. Practices such as participative decision-making, mentorship systems, recognition initiatives, and community engagement strategies may offer particularly actionable insights for principal preparation and professional development. Given the unique challenges rural principals face including limited staffing, loss of institutional memory, and heightened community visibility focused study on how leaders navigate these realities would be especially valuable.

Examination of External Influences

Teacher retention is shaped not only by school-based factors but also by conditions in the wider community. Future inquiry should examine the role of external influences such as housing availability, local labor markets, geographic isolation, and access to professional networks. Understanding how these factors intersect with school leadership and culture will provide a more comprehensive picture of what sustains or disrupts teacher stability in rural areas.

Teacher Voice and Agency

Further research should also amplify teacher voice, foregrounding how educators themselves define belonging, recognition, and professional support. Special attention should be given to differences across career stages, as early-career, mid-career, and late-career teachers may face distinct challenges and prioritize different supports. Such work would help tailor retention efforts to diverse needs within the teaching workforce.

Policy-Focused Investigations

Finally, there is a critical need for policy-focused studies that connect teacher retention to state and federal decision-making. Investigating the impact of certification requirements, salary structures, incentive programs, and resource allocation policies on rural retention could provide valuable guidance for legislators and education leaders. This line of research could help shape systemic reforms that address teacher shortages at scale while accounting for the unique realities of rural education.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, this study carries limitations that must be acknowledged when interpreting its findings.

1. Single-Site Case Study

The study was conducted in one rural high school in Middle Tennessee. While the findings provide valuable insights, they may not be generalizable to other rural schools with different demographics, community dynamics, or leadership styles.

2. Sample Size

Data were collected from a single principal and eight teachers. The small sample limits the breadth of perspectives and may not capture the full range of experiences of rural educators.

3. Self-Reported Data

The study relied on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, which are subject to

self-reporting bias. Participants may have presented experiences in ways that reflect positively on themselves or the school context.

4. **Researcher Interpretation**

As in all qualitative studies, the coding and theme development involved interpretive judgment. While steps were taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the analysis reflects the lens of the researcher.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the factors that encourage teacher retention in a rural high school by examining both the perceptions of the principal and the experiences of teachers. The findings revealed that retention is shaped by the interplay of personal ties to community, positive school climate, supportive and approachable leadership, teacher voice and recognition, and professional belonging through collegial relationships. Teachers consistently emphasized proximity to home and community as their primary motivator while the principal highlighted intentional hiring practices and climate-building strategies as critical to stability. Despite these nuanced differences, both perspectives affirmed that retention cannot be explained by financial considerations alone.

Instead, retention in this rural context is sustained through relationships, collegiality, and organizational practices that validate and support teachers. These findings contribute to the literature on rural education by underscoring the central role of community and leadership in teacher persistence. They also provide practical guidance for school leaders and policymakers

seeking to strengthen rural schools by investing in leadership development, recognition initiatives, and opportunities for teacher agency and voice.

Ultimately, the study affirms that retaining teachers in rural schools requires more than addressing structural challenges such as pay disparities. It requires cultivating environments where teachers feel connected to their communities, supported by their leaders, valued as professionals, and sustained by collegial bonds. By attending to these conditions, school leaders and policymakers can promote stability in the teaching force and improve educational outcomes for rural students.

Looking ahead, further research across multiple rural contexts and through comparative and longitudinal designs will be essential to deepen and extend these findings, ensuring that the insights of this study continue to inform leadership practice and policy at a broader scale.

REFERENCES

- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In K. H. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (4th ed., pp. 492–505). Jossey-Bass.
- Allen, M. B. (2005). Eight questions on teacher recruitment and retention: What does the research say? Education Commission of the States.
- Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago Public Schools. Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Aragon, S. (2016). Teacher shortages: What we know. Education Commission of the States.
- Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association. (2021). Educator shortage survey results: Arizona.
- Barley, Z. A. (2009). Preparing teachers for rural appointments: Lessons from the mid-continent. *The Rural Educator*, 30(3), 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i3.448>
- Barnes, G. (2013). Principal retention and teacher retention: The importance of leadership in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 34(3), 1–11.
- Barnes, G., Crowe, E., & Schaefer, B. (2007). The cost of teacher turnover in five school districts. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.
- Beck, A., Cook, K., & Stirling, K. (2020). Teacher turnover and retention: A meta-analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 94, 103118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103118>
- Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. Routledge.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. Wiley.

- Blaushild, N. L., & Seelig, J. L. (2024). *The logic(s) of school leaders' approaches to human capital management*. American Journal of Education. <https://doi.org/10.1086/729597>
- Boone, H. (2018). Rural teacher retention: Factors influencing teachers' decisions to stay or leave. *The Rural Educator*, 39(1), 1–12.
- Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Ing, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2011). *The influence of school administrators on teacher retention decisions*. American Educational Research Journal, 48(2), 303–333. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210380788>
- Brunetti, G. J. (2001). Why do they teach? A study of job satisfaction among veteran teachers. *Education*, 121(2), 329–339.
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burton, M., & Johnson, A. (2010). Where else would we teach? Rural teacher retention in a shifting policy environment. *The Rural Educator*, 31(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i2.448>
- Byrom, E., Overton, L., & McLeod, R. (2023). The influence of principal decision-making on teacher retention in rural schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 33(2), 123–140.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. Learning Policy Institute.

- Carver-Thomas, D., Darling-Hammond, L., & Kini, T. (2021). Teacher shortages during the pandemic. Learning Policy Institute.
- Cha, S., & Cohen-Vogel, L. (2011). Why they quit: A focused look at teachers who leave for other occupations. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 22(4), 371–392.
- Chang, M. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(3), 193–218.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-009-9106-y>
- Chenoweth, K. (2022). *Districts that succeed: Breaking the correlation between race, poverty, and achievement*. Harvard Education Press.
- Collins, R., & Schaaf, J. (2020). Teacher shortages: Causes, consequences, and policy responses. *Education Policy Brief*, 28(4), 1–8.
- Coyle, D. (2018). *The culture code: The secrets of highly successful groups*. Bantam.
- Crippen, C., & Willows, J. (2019). Servant-leadership in public schools: Exploring servant-leadership as a theoretical framework for principals. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 22(3), 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1450996>
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.
- De Stercke, J., Goyette, N., & Robertson, J. E. (2015). Happiness in the classroom: Strategies for teacher retention. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 5(1), 1–19.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T., & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work* (3rd ed.). Solution Tree Press.

- Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & Mattos, M. (2021). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work* (4th ed.). Solution Tree Press.
- Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & Burnette, R. (2021). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities* (2nd ed.). Solution Tree Press.
- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (2001). *Perceived organizational support*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(1), 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.1.42>
- Flores, T., & Shuls, J. V. (2024). *Rural teacher retention and community integration: Why place matters*. *Journal of Rural Education Policy*, 39(1), 15–29.
- Frahm, J. (2020). Leadership behaviors and teacher retention in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 41(2), 12–25.
- Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2020). U.S. schools struggle to hire and retain teachers. Economic Policy Institute.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2006). Teachers' resilience: A necessary condition for effectiveness. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(8), 1302–1316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.06.006>

- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1982). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 30(4), 233–252. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02765185>
- Hall, D. (2021). Teacher turnover in the wake of COVID-19. *Education Week*.
- Hancock, C. B., & Scherff, L. (2010). Who will stay and who will leave? Predicting secondary English teacher attrition risk. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(4), 328–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487110372214>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. Teachers College Press.
- Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. A. (2020). Rural education in the United States. In A. Schafft & B. Biddle (Eds.), *Rural education in America: What works for our students, teachers, and communities* (pp. 11–21). Routledge.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. State University of New York Press.
- Howard, S., & Johnson, B. (2004). Resilient teachers: Resisting stress and burnout. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7(4), 399–420.
- Illinois State Board of Education. (2021). *Illinois teacher shortage survey results*.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (1999). The problem of underqualified teachers in American secondary schools. *Educational Researcher*, 28(2), 26–37.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499–534.

- Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Rural teacher shortages: Causes, consequences, and policy implications. *The Rural Educator*, 44(1), 1–15.
- Institute for Educational Leadership. (2000). *Leadership for student learning: Reinventing the principalship*.
- Irwin, C. W., Zhang, X., Wang, X., & May, H. (2023). Teacher staffing and retention in U.S. public schools. National Center for Education Statistics.
- Johnson, S. M., Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2012). *How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement*. *Teachers College Record*, 114(10), 1–39.
- Kraft, M. A., Marinell, W. H., & Yee, D. S. W. (2016). School organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(5), 1411–1449. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216667478>
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Lachlan, A., Smith, B., & Thomas, J. (2020). Teacher retention during times of crisis: A survey report. *Journal of Teacher Education Policy*, 15(2), 14–25.
- Ladd, H. F. (2011). Teachers' perceptions of their working conditions: How predictive of planned and actual teacher movement? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(2), 235–261.
- Learning Policy Institute. (2019). *Understanding teacher shortages: A state-by-state analysis*.

- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). A review of transformational school leadership research 1996–2005. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 4*(3), 177–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760500244769>
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How leadership influences student learning. Wallace Foundation.
- Lezotte, L. W., & Snyder, K. M. (2011). What effective schools do: Re-envisioning the correlates. Solution Tree Press.
- Lochmiller, C. R., Perrone, F., & Finley, C. (2024). Principals' roles in teacher retention: A multi-state study. *Journal of Educational Administration, 62*(1), 45–63.
- Lucas, P., Fleming, J., & Bhosale, J. (2018). Case study research in practice. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 10*(3), 1–6.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Monk, D. H. (2007). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *The Future of Children, 17*(1), 155–174. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2007.0009>
- Muhammad, A. (2009). *Transforming school culture: How to overcome staff division*. Solution Tree Press.
- Muhammad, A., & Hollie, S. (2012). The will to lead, the skill to teach: Transforming schools at every level. Solution Tree Press.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures. National Academies Press.

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Digest of education statistics, 2022*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest>
- Nguyen, T. D. (2020). Teacher attrition in context: Evidence from a national meta-analysis. *Educational Researcher*, 49(3), 195–208.
- Nguyen, T. D. (2022). Measuring teacher shortages in the United States. Annenberg Institute.
- Nguyen, T. D., Lam, C. B., & Schaaf, J. (2020). Factors influencing teacher attrition: A meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 100355.
- Ontong, K. (2022). School climate as a factor in teacher commitment. *South African Journal of Education*, 42(3), 1–13.
- Oyen, K., & Schweinle, W. (2020). Teacher retention in rural schools: Challenges and supports. *The Rural Educator*, 41(2), 1–12.
- Perie, M., & Baker, D. P. (1997). Job satisfaction among America's teachers: Effects of workplace conditions, background characteristics, and teacher compensation. National Center for Education Statistics.
- Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator*, 38(1), 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.229>
- Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., Stormont, M., & Newcomer, L. (2025). Teacher stress, burnout, and attrition: A longitudinal study. *Journal of School Psychology*, 98, 101–120.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage.

- Salvo-Garrido, S., Gonzalez, R., Pérez, C., & Contreras, A. (2025). Teacher resilience: A multidimensional model. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 123, 103947.
- Scallon, D., Bristol, T. J., & Esboldt, J. (2023). School leadership and teacher retention: Insights from low-turnover schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(3), 451–482.
- Schmoker, M. (2018). *Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Seelig, T. (2021). Staying for the community: Place-based factors in rural teacher retention. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 37(3), 45–61. <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-07/37-3.pdf>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Showalter, D., Klein, R., Johnson, J., & Hartman, S. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018–2019: The time is now*. Rural School and Community Trust. <https://www.ruraledu.org/WhyRuralMatters.pdf>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stronge, J. H. (2008). *Qualities of effective principals*. ASCD.
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S. Learning Policy Institute.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.

- Tran, H., & Dou, J. (2019). Rural teacher retention: Review of research and practice. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 35(3), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3503>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Teacher shortages: Trends and strategies*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov>
- Van Camp, J. (2020). *Deliberate discomfort: How U.S. Special Operations forces overcome fear and dare to win by getting comfortable being uncomfortable*. Ballast Books.
- Vincent, S. (2018). Teacher motivation and retention in high-poverty rural districts. *The Rural Educator*, 39(2), 45–58.
- Williams, D., Richardson, M., & Thomas, J. (2002). Global challenges in education: Teacher shortages during crises. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(1), 89–104.
- Williams, D., Richardson, M., & Thomas, J. (2022). Managing educator turnover in diverse contexts. *Journal of Education Policy*, 37(2), 201–218.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Principal Interview Protocol

Candidate Name:

Date of Interview:

Time Interview Began:

Time Interview Concluded:

Participant Pseudonym:

Participant Information:

Interviewer (I):

This interview should take about 45-60 minutes.

Do you mind if I record our conversation?

Teacher retention is a big part of maintaining the education system. Secondary teachers are incredibly difficult to retain. Retaining teachers in smaller districts can be even more difficult.

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions the leader of one rural high school in middle Tennessee has about their potential influence on yearly teacher retention.

Your responses and your identity will remain confidential. You will receive a printed copy of the transcript of this interview to provide you with the opportunity to check for accuracy and correct any information.

You may end the interview at any time. Just tell me you want to stop.

Do you understand everything so far? Do you have any questions?

May we begin?

Participant (P):

1. Describe your educational background include your experience as an educational leader.

Possible Probe – describe your path to education.

2. How long have you been in education?
3. How long have you been at this school?
4. Why did you choose to come to this school?
5. Why have you chosen to stay at this school?
6. Describe how you view your role as a lead principal in this school. Role in terms of expectations of a leader. How do you feel you make an impact on the school as the leader?
7. Describe the hiring process for teachers at this school.
8. Why do you believe teachers stay at this school?
9. What actions do you take to influence teacher retention at this school?
10. What reasons do you believe teachers at this school would give for returning to this school each year?

11. How, if at all, are teachers encouraged to give feedback on your practices as a school leader?
12. How does teacher feedback impact your leadership?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix B
Teacher Interview Protocol

Candidate Name:

Date of Interview:

Time Interview Began:

Time Interview Concluded:

Participant Pseudonym:

Participant Information:

Interviewer (I):

This interview should take about 45-60 minutes.

Do you mind if I record our conversation?

Teacher retention is a big part of maintaining the education system. Secondary teachers are incredibly difficult to retain. Retaining teachers in smaller districts can be even more difficult. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions the leader of one rural high school in middle Tennessee has about their potential influence on yearly teacher retention.

Your responses and your identity will remain confidential. You will receive a printed copy of the transcript of this interview to provide you with the opportunity to check for accuracy and correct any information.

You may end the interview at any time. Just tell me you want to stop.

Do you understand everything so far? Do you have any questions?

May we begin?

Participant (P):

1. Describe your educational background include your experience as a teacher at the current school.
2. How many years have your worked in education?
3. How many years have you worked at for this county?
4. If you have left this county and returned, why did you leave the district and return? Why did you choose a different district to begin your career?
5. If you have worked in both rural and urban/suburban districts, why do believe teachers choose one over the other?
6. What factors motivated you to apply for a position in this school district?
7. Describe how you came to teach for this district. Please include the hiring process and recruitment.
8. Describe your current role at this school.
9. What motivates you to stay at this school?
10. What do you believe motivates other teachers to stay at this school?
11. What, if any, action does the executive principal take to encourage teacher retention?

12. If the executive principal does not impact teacher retention, who does? Tell me how they encourage teacher retention.
13. What actions do you feel the executive principal should take to retain more teachers?
14. What kind of feedback are you encouraged to give to the executive principal?
15. How is feedback given to the executive principal?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add?