

Chapter 9

Increasing Teacher Efficacy Through Rural Partnerships

Ann Schulte

California State University – Chico, USA

Rebecca Justeson

California State University – Chico, USA

ABSTRACT

The rural teacher residency (RTR) program at California State University – Chico was a program funded by a Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant from 2010-2015. The RTR program prepared teachers through partnerships with four school districts in the rural region of northern California. This residency program was designed to provide targeted training and experience in co-teaching, action research, professional learning communities, and collaboration. In addition, RTR faculty hoped to impact the retention of teachers for hard-to-staff schools such as those with underserved students and/or in rural settings. The purpose of the chapter is to briefly overview the design features of the RTR program and to describe the qualitative data analysis of an evaluation of the program (i.e., focus groups, survey, observations/interviews) at the conclusion of the grant funding cycle.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher shortages are occurring throughout the United States, and these shortages may be especially felt in the rural areas of the country (Fong, Makkonen, & Jaquet, 2016). Many teacher preparation programs have concentrated on ways to address these impending teacher shortages, and some of these programs have focused on the importance of preparing teachers specifically for rural schools (e.g. Azano & Stewart, 2014). There are a plethora of teacher education programs to prepare urban teachers, but very few that address the needs of rural contexts specifically (Schafft, 2016).

In 2009 a group of faculty at California State University, Chico set out to create an innovative teacher education pathway built upon strong relationships and partnership with the schools in the rural region. The institution received a Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant for 7.3 million dollars, funded by the federal Department of Education. The purpose of the grant was to improve student achievement by improving the quality of new teachers.

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The program supports partnerships among universities, high-need school districts, and high-need schools to implement reforms in teacher preparation programs, especially those using a teacher residency program model. (Tuss & Wang, 2016, p. 1)

The funding for the RTR program lasted five years and produced 88 certified teachers in elementary or special education. School district partners included Cascade Union Elementary School District, Marysville Joint Unified School District, Orland Unified School District, and Palermo Union School District. The TQP grant also required business and community partners, which were established at the time of the grant application, but few of these partnerships emerged as strong connections throughout the course of the program.

California State University, Chico serves 12 counties in a 33,000 square mile region that is largely agricultural and mountainous. The School of Education typically partners with more than 50 school districts and annually prepares hundreds of teachers in the areas of elementary, secondary, special education, and bilingual education. The TQP grant enabled the School of Education to develop and implement an innovative new program of professional preparation for prospective teachers. The RTR program sought to establish partnerships with rural districts with hopes for more successful recruitment and retention of teachers in those districts and the surrounding areas. This grant project was comprised of two programs:

(1) a pre-baccalaureate blended program leading to a bachelor's degree in liberal studies with a minor in education and an elementary or special education credential, and; (2) the Rural Teacher Residency (RTR), an 18-month master's in education/elementary or special education credential program with a yearlong, full-time teaching residency. (Tuss & Wang, 2016, p. 1)

Together, the two programs were designed to provide highly qualified general and special education teachers for high-need schools. This chapter focuses specifically on the second program, a highly intensive blended credential and master's degree program, both because of the strong focus on partnership with regional school districts and because of the use of innovative methods for preparing teachers in the rural region.

In the twelve counties served by California State University, Chico, 32%, on average, of practicing teachers are predicted to retire between 2014 and 2024 (Fong, Makkonen, & Jaquet, 2016, p. A-2-A-3). Because the research (e.g. Reininger, 2012) suggests that teacher education graduates often choose to live near their hometown, the RTR program worked to recruit program participants from CSU, Chico's primarily rural region in order to help fill the predicted vacancies. In addition, there was some hope that RTR graduates who were not predisposed to teaching in rural contexts might choose to stay, as a result of their experience in the residency program. In order to incentivize graduates, the TQP grant funding provided students with a stipend which was forgivable if the graduates worked in a high need district (though not necessarily rural) for three years upon completion of the program. In urban residencies (e.g. Newark Montclair Urban Teacher Residency) it is common to guarantee graduates a job in the partner district. Although RTR graduates were highly sought after when partner districts were hiring (Principal C. Brown, personal communication, May 24, 2017), a guaranteed job is far more difficult in smaller rural districts where openings are more limited. To date, 20 (22%) of RTR graduates have been hired in one of the four partner districts, and 52 graduates (59%) have completed their service obligation in a high need school, most of which are also rural.

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