



Rural Teacher Shortage Leads Schools to Grow Own

BY: Alan Scher Zagier, Associated Press

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Suzanne Feldman realizes she's an anomaly: a soon-to-be college graduate who wants to return to the languid rhythms of rural life rather than flee.

The aspiring high school math teacher is a member of the inaugural class of the Ozarks Teacher Corps, a group of southwest Missouri teachers in training who receive \$4,000 annual scholarships in exchange for a three-year commitment to work in rural school districts after graduation.

Having grown up in a town with fewer than 3,000 residents, a place where your homeroom instructor is just as likely to be sitting in the same church pew come Sunday, the 21-year-old newlywed knows that small-town teachers are not just educators but also neighbors and role models.

"The community's expectations are higher," said Feldman, a senior at Drury University in Springfield, Mo. "When it's a small community, everybody knows everybody _ and expects a whole lot more."

Faced with chronic teacher shortages and unable to compete with the higher salaries and greater social opportunities found in big cities and suburban districts, a growing number of rural school systems are turning to familiar faces to teach their students.

They know teachers with rural backgrounds are more likely to stick around and not leave for after a year or two. They can be pretty sure that the absence of late-night clubs or art-house movie theaters won't drive away otherwise idealistic young teachers.

And they can count on those teachers being more in touch with their students' home lives, whether their parents are Indiana farmers, Mississippi factory workers or Northern California grape pickers.

"Small, rural communities are grounded in tradition and have deep roots," said Catherine Kearney, president of the California Teacher Corps. "Someone who understands those traditions makes a huge difference."

The California effort consists of more than 70 programs aimed at luring professionals with non-teaching experience into the classroom. Last year, the teacher corps shifted its emphasis to rural school districts in a state with 300,000 students from rural areas.

Half of those students are minorities, and 25 percent come from homes where English is not the native language. That makes for a different approach to teacher recruitment than programs based in other parts of the country.

Esther Soto, 43, started out two decades ago as parent volunteer in the rural Mendocino County town of Boonville, located 120 miles north of San Francisco. She spent 18 years as a teacher's assistant before returning to school for her teacher's certification.

Soto now teaches kindergarten in the Anderson Valley school district. When the high school found itself in need of a Spanish teacher, the native of Mexico took on that role as well.

"I know the families," she said. "I'm more likely to make a connection. I've seen some of these kids since kindergarten. They can't escape from me."

Roughly 10.5 million students in this country _ nearly 20 percent of the school-age population - attend rural schools, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, a nonprofit advocacy group based in northern Virginia.

The group's research shows that the 900 poorest rural school districts have higher poverty rates than school systems in Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia and other urban areas typically considered as the toughest places to teach, and learn.

It's those sort of eye-opening comparisons that rural education advocates say demands a new, national approach to closing the gap. The Rural School and Community Trust found that 12 states graduate fewer than 60 percent of students from their poorest rural districts: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota and South Dakota.

"As a society, we focus our attention on inner-city kids, and blighted urban school districts," said Randy Shaver, schools superintendent in Tupelo, Miss.

Shaver was one of nine rural superintendents from across the country who met with Education Secretary Arne Duncan late last year to discuss reform proposals.

His idea: a national rural teaching corps that would build upon the regional efforts found in places such as Missouri, California and Indiana, where Purdue and two other universities are training math and science professionals to return to the classroom.

"We need something that's far more intensive and far broader," Shaver said.

Many of the newer efforts to foster homegrown teaching talent aim to train not just capable educators but to also inspire those rural teachers to become community leaders.

Gary Funk, president of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, which parlayed a \$1.7 million private donation to create the Missouri program, hopes that Feldman and her contemporaries develop into "rural activists."

To that end, Ozarks Teacher Corps participants immerse themselves in the study of rural economies, local history and other matters beyond their chosen specialties. They meet regularly for feedback and support and are assigned mentors to guide them through the early years in the classroom, when challenges and frustration can be at their highest.

"In traditional teacher training, we don't focus so much on the context of community," Funk said.