

Going the Country Mile

How UW–Madison is addressing Wisconsin's rural education issues

Attracting teachers to Wisconsin's rural school districts can be a challenge. Why is that? Peter Goff, a WCER researcher and assistant professor in UW–Madison's Department of Education, Leadership and Policy Analysis, is working on an answer to that question and others.

"The hiring pool for teachers in rural districts doesn't look that much different in numbers or qualifications than in other districts—with the exception of suburban districts, which attract 20 percent more applicants," states Goff, who is collaborating with the Wisconsin Association of School Personnel Administrators and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction on new research around application and hiring data.

"We know that retaining teachers is a problem facing all schools, but teachers right out of school will take a rural job just to get experience under their belts, while continuing to look for positions in suburban areas," the preferred work locale for most Wisconsin teachers, he explains.

The UW–Madison education labor expert says it costs anywhere from \$4,000 to \$9,000 to hire one teacher in Wisconsin. "So if you hire teachers who are transitory, and have restricted funds like rural schools, you're bleeding yourself every time you hire a new educator."

Ken Kasinski adds another perspective. As agency administrator for CESA 12, an education service agency in Ashland that serves 17 rural school districts, Kasinski believes the most immediate problem in his region is recruiting.

"Many teachers don't want to work in a school with just 200 kids. They wonder if they'll have enough resources," he explains.

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Rural school districts have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers.

In keeping with the Wisconsin Idea that university research should benefit all state citizens, a partnership among DPI, UW–Madison’s School of Education and Wisconsin Center for Education Research offers school districts help in addressing local issues.

The university places skilled graduate students, Network Fellows, in Wisconsin education organizations to provide free problem-solving assistance—connecting UW–Madison education researchers with the state’s K-12 educators and policymakers.

Earlier this year, The Network assigned doctoral student Jennifer Seelig to assist Kasinski and other CESA 12 district leaders on improving teacher recruitment and retention.

“Our fellows ARE the Wisconsin Idea: Their job is to bring to the field the knowledge and resources of our great university for the public good, and Jennifer has done that through her field work in Northern Wisconsin,” says Laura Dunek, a Network project coordinator.

Besides high poverty—about 51 percent of students in CESA 12 are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, according to Kasinski—other issues feed into recruitment and retention challenges for rural schools, such as isolation.

“If you’re single and trying to find a relationship, it’s very difficult in the north woods,” says Kasinski. As is finding a place to live, since affordable rentals are generally hard to find in Northern Wisconsin.

According to Seelig’s research, other significant factors play into attracting teachers to rural classrooms. For one, rural teachers earn less than urban and suburban educators. And because rural schools are smaller, teachers could teach more than one subject, meaning more work for less pay.

What’s more, fewer students are going into teaching overall. The U.S. Department of Education reports a 27.9 percent decrease in college students enrolling in teacher prep programs across the state.

In his research, Goff discovered one of the strongest draws for where teachers apply is the proximity to where they did student teaching. Therein lies another problem, says Seelig. “Most colleges and universities are not located in rural areas.” Goff’s research shows that city and suburban districts average five or more educator preparation programs within a 40-mile radius; town and rural districts average fewer than two.



Many teachers don’t want to work in schools with a small population of children and scarce resources, according to Ken Kasinski, agency administrator for CESA 12.

However, the biggest challenge is that too many people are moving out of rural areas, directly impacting school enrollment and, therefore, state funding. The Wisconsin State Journal reports that rural school districts from 2000 to 2010 suffered a 7.5 percent enrollment decline.

The graduate fellow notes: “Declining enrollment in rural schools, declining populations in rural areas, and recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers is all related.” But she remains hopeful. “Everyone up here knows that losing people is the issue, and recognition of the problem is the key to solving it.”

To attract more teachers up north, Kasinski and Seelig collaborated on several innovative solutions, including a marketing strategy and brand development for CESA 12. Basically, sell the Northern Wisconsin experience, says Kasinski. “For instance, did you know that Chequamegon is the home of the fat-tire race won by Greg LeMond?”

They encouraged superintendents to work with community partners to create a digital welcome packet for prospective teachers, similar to what Chambers of Commerce do, which contains information on community events, housing rentals, Internet service providers, healthcare options and recreational activities—areas of interest Seelig identified in her research as important to rural education applicants.

To prospective teachers considering the move to Northern Wisconsin, Kasinski gives it his best elevator pitch. “You’ll love the uniqueness of the area and high quality of life. And you’ll definitely have a hand in shaping education.”

The Force of the GEDI

Diversity internships open doors for underrepresented students

There's a GEDI at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Like any Jedi, Tenah Hunt is a scientist and a teacher who values knowledge, wisdom and serving others. She does not, however, carry a light saber.

Hunt is a graduate student and intern with WCER's LEAD Center. Her 10-month appointment is part of the national Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI) Program, which provides internships and training for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in the field of evaluation. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) sponsors the program and the LEAD Center is a host site.

Hunt is one of a cohort of 15 GEDIs nationwide. Already familiar with campus as a doctoral student in social welfare, she brings to the LEAD Center a long history of working to improve the well-being of vulnerable children and families.

"I'm fortunate to be working at WCER because I hope to eventually work for a research center," she says.

Christine Pribbenow, who directs the LEAD Center, is thrilled that Hunt is part of the GEDI program. "Evaluation is a wonderful profession, and to support and mentor new scholars in this career path is very fulfilling. Because she is involved in the AEA and receiving professional development, we hope to learn as much from her as she learns from us."

Hunt is leading a mixed-methods evaluation of UW-Madison's McNair Scholars Program. It prepares traditionally underrepresented undergraduate students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. The U.S. Department of Education funds the program at 151 institutions across the U.S. and Puerto Rico.



Tenah Hunt, graduate student and intern, WCER's LEAD Center

"I'm interviewing campus stakeholders about the success of the McNair program," Hunt says. Her goal is to help increase the number of underrepresented students entering as undergrads and continuing through Ph.D. programs.

A California native, Hunt has a B.A. in human biology from Stanford University and an M.A. in public health from the University of Michigan. She has researched treatments for pediatric bipolar disorder, evaluated a program to improve relationships between African American non-resident fathers and their sons, and interned at an advocacy organization to reduce racial disparities in Wisconsin.

Recent Publications/Findings

Improving Higher Education with Training in Inclusive Teaching

A new faculty development program, facilitated by UW-Madison's Donald L. Gillian-Daniel and Megan E. Schmid, promotes inclusive teaching to improve undergraduate education and address pervasive achievement gaps in higher education. Contact lldaniel@wisc.edu for details.



Education and Youth Agency: Qualitative Case Studies in Global Contexts

As co-editor and chapter author of this new book, WCER researcher Kate McCleary offers a comprehensive

look at youth in Africa, the Americas and South Asia. It explores perspectives of youth agency in relation to education, citizenship, social norms and more.



Recent Publications/Findings

New Media Technologies Can Change Learning

Educators can turn to new media tools, such as maker spaces, video games and fantasy sports, for ideas on how to transform their schools into 21st-century learning environments. A research team led by Rich and Erica Halverson studied how schools can build participatory cultures that expand the horizon of classrooms to improve learning for all students. Findings are available in a WCER working paper.



Teaching About Political Parties and Ideology

Educators want young people to become “informed voters” by studying issues and candidates before casting ballots. However, while studying issues is one important aspect of becoming informed, researchers Paula McAvoy and Rebecca Fine of UW–Madison and Ann Herrera Ward of Carroll University argue in a working paper that without connecting the issues to ideology and political parties, educators overlook what political scientists say motivates people who show up to the polls.



News

Is the Educational System Failing Black Men?

Jerlando F L Jackson speaks at international colloquium

Universities can do much more to be inclusive to black men, asserts UW–Madison professor of higher education Jerlando F L Jackson. His suggestions include better access to opportunities, more available mentors and fewer distractions, such as safety concerns and financial difficulties.



The Benefits of Testing English-Language Learners

Language Magazine interviews WIDA's Mariana Castro

Language proficiency assessments provide information on learning that has already occurred and are used to meet policy requirements. However, data can also be used to help schools or districts identify specific areas of focus, look for patterns in language development of students, and guide teaching and learning.



UW–Madison Teacher Pay Study to Help Inform Wisconsin School Boards, Policymakers

First to document teacher pay changes after landmark legislation

Research led by Steve Kimball discusses changing the single salary schedule, creating career ladders and compensation levels, and using salary increases/bonuses to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in hard-to-fill jobs.

UW–Madison Wins Two First-Ever NSF INCLUDES Awards Funds to help diversify U.S. science and engineering workforce

WCER Director Robert Mathieu and researcher Jerlando F L Jackson will each receive first-ever National Science Foundation INCLUDES funding. Mathieu's award will help develop an alliance among 45 universities and 23 national cross-sector partners to help underrepresented students succeed in undergraduate STEM courses. Jackson will build a data repository from three minority doctoral scholars programs to identify proven recruitment and retention strategies.

For more findings, news and events, visit: wcer.wisc.edu/news/newsletter.



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