

## RURAL DISTRICT LEADER PERCEPTIONS OF THE EDUCATOR LABOR MARKET

### Introduction

Access to highly effective teachers is essential for student achievement, but growing evidence suggests students have unreliable and inequitable access to effective teachers, with many Tennessee school districts reporting high levels of teacher vacancies.<sup>1</sup> Rural districts specifically face unique challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining talent, leading to lingering vacancies and a growing need to issue emergency credentials to meet hiring needs.<sup>2</sup> To better understand the current state of rural educator labor markets, SCORE sought perspectives from rural district leaders across the state to elevate ongoing educator labor market challenges and opportunities.

This paper is the second in a series exploring the broader trends behind Tennessee's educator labor market challenges and offering actionable solutions to school, district, and policy leaders. It includes results from a SCORE-conducted survey to gather perspectives from district leaders across the state, particularly rural district leaders.

The first paper in the series, [\*Understanding The Educator Labor Market: A Look At Tennessee's Data\*](#), elevated key educator labor market insights from a study of 15 school districts in partnership with the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) at Vanderbilt University.

This paper expands and extends those insights by diving deeper into rural perspectives on educator labor market challenges. The perception data covered in this paper confirms that more work is needed to ensure all students — regardless of the community they live in — have access to a reliable, effective, and diverse educator workforce.

**Many rural districts face unique challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining talent, leading to continued vacancies and a growing need to issue emergency credentials to meet hiring needs.**

Research indicates that rural schools face a number of unique challenges when recruiting and retaining educators, such as:

- Geographic isolation, which results in fewer available applicants.
- Smaller tax bases, which results in limited financial capacity for teacher compensation and classroom resources.
- Constrained staffing and smaller faculty sizes, which results in increased workloads for individual teachers.<sup>3 4</sup>

In addition to these unique challenges, research also suggests that much like urban schools, many rural schools experience high concentrations of children in poverty, which also contributes to increased teacher turnover.<sup>5</sup> Because these obstacles are inherent to operating a rural school, it is critical that attention is given to enhancing the local practices of school leaders to support and retain qualified teachers.<sup>6</sup>

**Rural schools — and, therefore, rural educator labor markets — play a major role in Tennessee's education landscape.**

In Tennessee, over 280,000 students attend rural schools, ranking Tennessee fifth in the nation for the number of students served in rural communities.<sup>7</sup> This represents more than one-quarter of all students in

the state.<sup>8</sup> If we want to ensure that all Tennessee students have access to a reliable, effective, and diverse educator workforce, it is important to understand how current policies and practices are addressing labor market challenges in rural communities.

## To better understand the current state of rural educator labor markets, SCORE conducted a survey of district leaders across the state, with a particular focus on the perspectives of rural district leaders.

A total of 39 districts completed the survey and were categorized according to their district's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale indicator. Of the 39 participants, seven were classified as "city," one was classified as "suburb," 14 were classified as "town," and 17 were classified as "rural." For the purposes of the following analysis, a district was considered rural if it was classified as "rural" or "town" per NCES, resulting in 31 total rural district perspectives. The rural and town districts in our sample account for approximately 28 percent of the rural and town districts in our state and represent 160,255 students and 11,055 teachers. This represents approximately 17 percent of all students and 16 percent of all teachers in Tennessee.<sup>9 10</sup>

The survey asked rural district leaders to share their insights on the following research questions:

- What are district leader perspectives on the current state of the teacher pipeline in Tennessee generally, and in each of their districts?
- What do district leaders believe are the major causes behind their staffing challenges?
- What are districts doing to strengthen their pipelines, and what do they think is working?
- What do district leaders believe needs to be done to have a reliable, effective, and diverse workforce?

Key insights from the survey follow.

## Rural District Leader Perceptions Of The Educator Labor Market

### Overview

1. [Rural district leaders express concern over the strength of Tennessee's teacher pipeline and its ability to produce enough teachers to meet student needs.](#)
2. [Rural district leaders believe that both higher teacher turnover and fewer applicants are driving vacancies in their districts, with salary and workload playing a major role.](#)
3. [Many rural districts are attempting to lessen the use of emergency credentials, but the time and costs associated with educator preparation programs create barriers for candidates to achieve full licensure and appropriate endorsements.](#)
4. [Rural districts have leveraged many of the state-sponsored initiatives to address educator vacancies and have found short-term, low-cost interventions to be the most helpful.](#)
5. [Rural districts have limited capacity to develop and implement comprehensive human capital strategies and desire greater support to develop strong local policies and practices, particularly regarding compensation.](#)
6. [While rural districts report having the capacity to collect and track key human capital data, current data collection processes lack the sophistication to provide quick access to actionable insights.](#)

Rural district leaders express concern over the strength of Tennessee’s teacher pipeline and its ability to produce enough teachers to meet student needs.

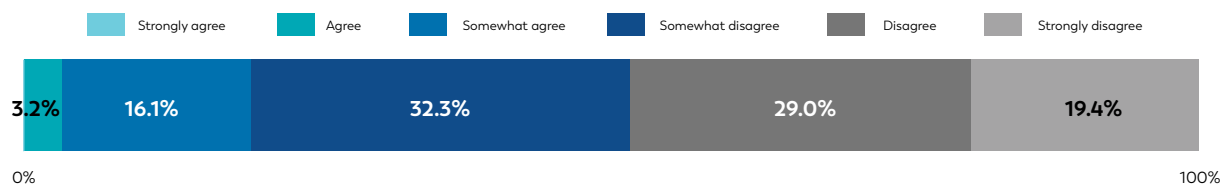
With limited publicly available data to understand rural educator labor market dynamics across the state, the 31 rural district leaders’ perceptions can lead to a better understanding of the current challenges and opportunities these districts experience as they

attempt to recruit, retain, and develop effective educators in their schools.

Over 80 percent of rural district leaders in our sample do not believe Tennessee’s teacher pipeline is producing enough effective educators. This is unsurprising given the 40-percent decline in individuals completing educator preparation programs (EPPs) in Tennessee since 2011, and in the Fall of 2022, there were over 1,000 vacant positions across the state (defined as unfilled teaching positions that may result in the lack of course availability or an increase in the teacher-student ratio).<sup>11 12</sup>

Over 80 percent of rural district leaders in our sample do not believe Tennessee’s teacher pipeline is producing enough effective educators.

Tennessee’s current teacher pipeline is producing the number of effective educators we need to support the students in our state.

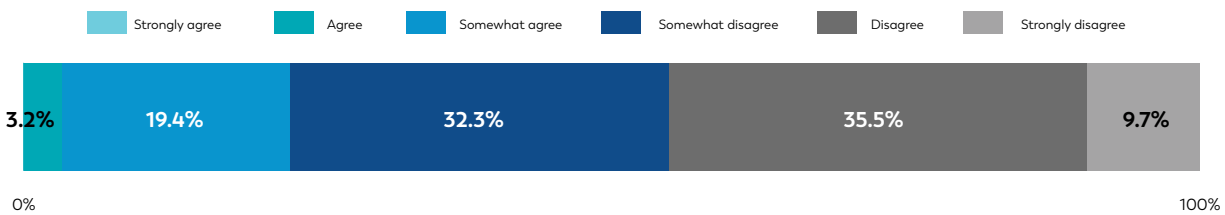


Relatedly, over 75 percent of rural district leaders shared that they do not believe their district has access to the number of effective educators they need to support their students. While there are limited data available to understand vacancy trends over time for rural Tennessee school districts, the one-time snapshots available from recent years validate rural district leaders’ perceptions as they continue to face staffing challenges. In the Fall of 2022, rural and town

districts reported 395 vacancies, or approximately 39 percent of the state’s total.<sup>13</sup> While rural and town districts account for fewer total vacancies than city and suburban districts, this perception data indicates that the impact of these vacancies in rural settings likely has an outsized effect, particularly given that rural districts tend to, on average, staff fewer teachers.<sup>14</sup>

Over 75 percent of rural district leaders do not believe their district has access to the number of effective educators it needs to support students.

My district currently has access to the number of effective educators it needs to support our students.



**Rural district leaders believe that both higher teacher turnover and fewer applicants are driving vacancies in their districts, with salary and workload playing a major role.**

Considering that vacancies are having a significant impact on rural districts, it is particularly important for district leaders to better understand the underlying causes of vacancies in order to design and implement strategies to address them.

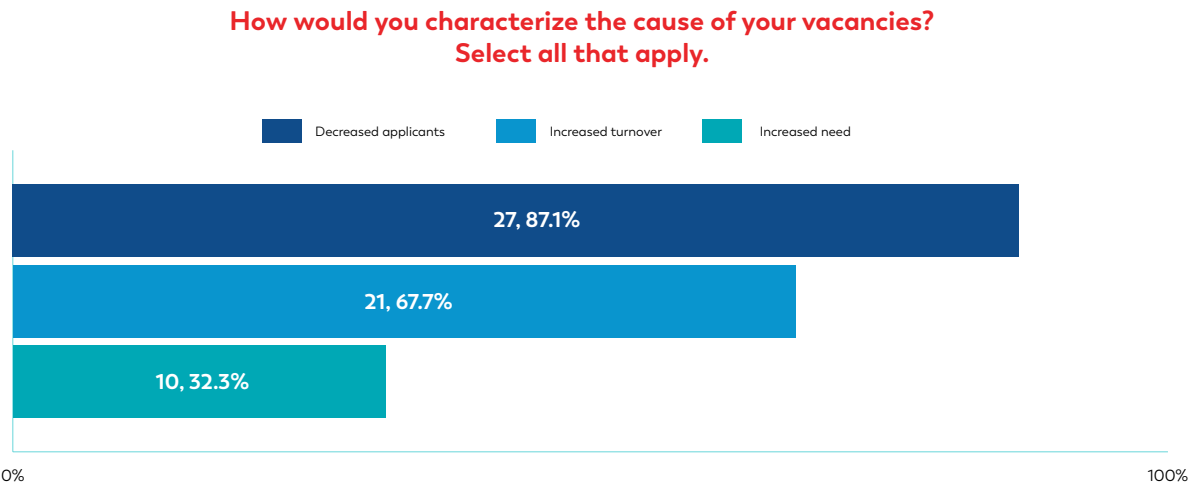
Over 80 percent of the rural district leaders surveyed believed their vacancies were driven by decreased applicants. Given that rural districts tend to be physically farther from EPPs, the statewide decrease in EPP completers is likely felt more acutely by rural districts who have access to fewer EPP partnerships.<sup>15</sup> When given the opportunity to share about the nature of their relationship with nearby EPPs, one rural district

leader expressed disappointment that larger EPPs tended to prioritize larger districts, and they desired mechanisms to encourage partnerships with smaller rural districts more often.

More than 60 percent of the rural district leaders surveyed cited increased turnover, whether due to resignation or retirement, as a cause for vacancies. This perception is validated by nationally representative data indicating that pre-retirement teacher turnover is the primary driver of shortages and staffing problems in rural schools.<sup>16</sup>

However, just 30 percent of rural district leaders reported that vacancies in their district were driven by increased need, which presents a unique advantage for rural districts. With fluctuations in student enrollment less likely in their communities, rural districts may have more stable staffing needs than their urban and suburban peers, improving their ability to successfully project staffing needs year to year and to design strategies that meet future and ongoing needs.

Rural district leaders believe their vacancies are driven by decreased applicants, followed by increased turnover and increased need.

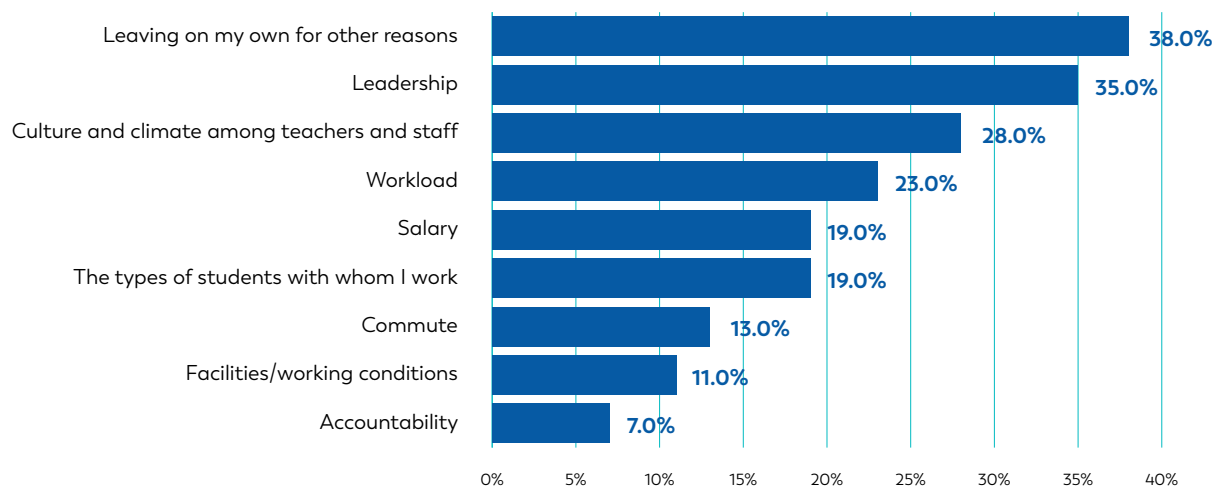


Statewide results from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES) indicated the top five factors that educators report most influenced their plans to not teach in their school the following year were: leaving

on their own for other reasons, leadership, culture and climate among teachers and staff, workload, and salary.<sup>17</sup>

The top five factors influencing teachers' decisions to not teach the following school year.

**Which of the following most influenced your plans to not teach in your school next year?**



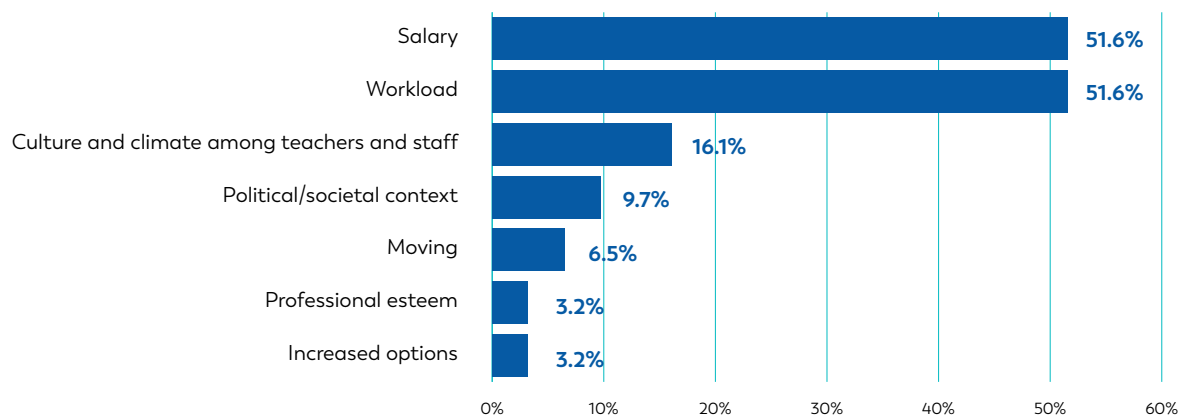
Source: 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey

To better understand which of these factors felt most salient to rural districts, we asked our sample of rural district leaders to identify which factors they believed were causing increased turnover; over half reported

that salary and workload (the fourth and fifth most reported factors on the 2023 TES) were primary drivers for turnover in their districts.

Rural district leaders believe salary and workload are primary drivers for turnover.

**If you responded "Increased turnover" as the cause for vacancies, which of the following factors do you believe has resulted in increased turnover? Select all that apply.**



Many rural districts are attempting to lessen the use of emergency credentials, but the time and costs associated with educator preparation programs create barriers for candidates to achieve full licensure and appropriate endorsements.

Emergency credentials provide flexibility to districts when they are unable to find a licensed educator to fill a vacant position. There are two categories of emergency credentials:

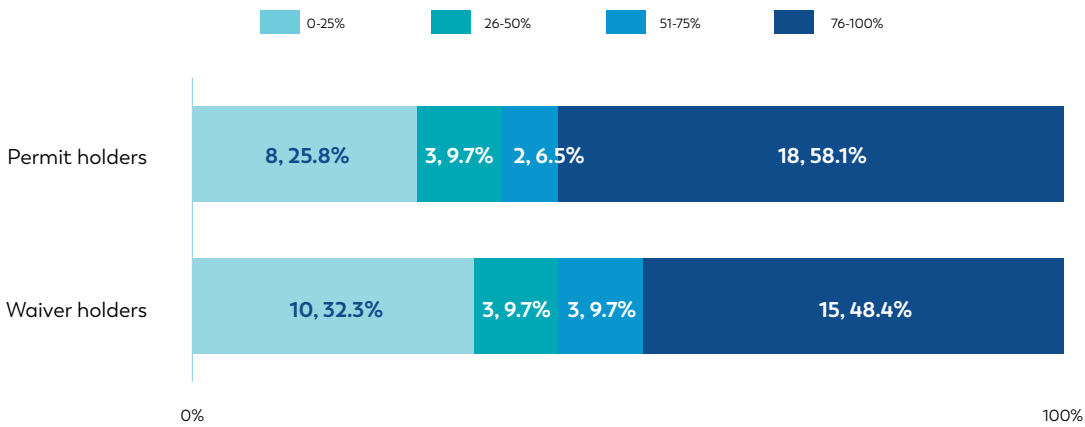
- **Permit:** A temporary teaching license granted to an individual with a bachelor’s degree who does not hold an active Tennessee educator license.

- **Waiver (or endorsement exemption):** Granted to a licensed Tennessee educator who does not hold the appropriate endorsement to teach a specified course.

Emergency credentialed educators have demonstrated an interest in the teaching profession and often fill hard-to-staff positions, presenting districts with an incredible opportunity to permanently fill vacancies if they are able to support the conversion of these emergency credentials to the necessary licensure and endorsements. The rural district leaders in our survey clearly recognize this opportunity, as they report that more than half of their emergency credentialed educators are actively working toward earning full licensure and appropriate endorsements.

In many districts, more than 50 percent of educators on permits and waivers are working toward earning full licensure and appropriate endorsements.

What percentage of your educators on permits and waivers are actively working toward earning the appropriate license and endorsements?

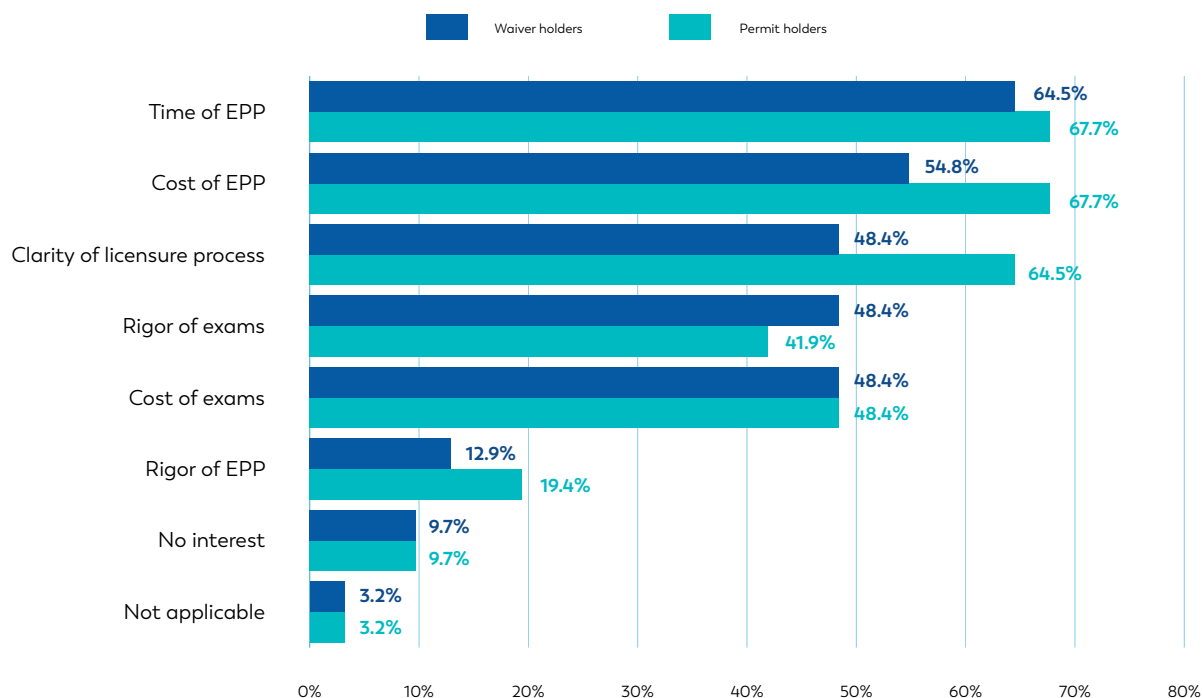


Although educators are operating with converting emergency credentials in mind, rural districts often face barriers with the time and costs associated with

educator preparation programs as they attempt to support these educators to full licensure and appropriate endorsements.

Rural districts most often face barriers with the time and costs associated with educator preparation programs when attempting to convert educators on permits and waivers to full licensure.

### What challenges have you seen for educators on permits and waivers when they attempt to attain the appropriate licensure and endorsements?



Rural districts have leveraged many of the state-sponsored initiatives to address educator vacancies and have found short-term, low-cost interventions to be the most helpful.

In recent years, Tennessee has invested in several initiatives to support the teacher pipeline across the state:

- Grow Your Own (GYO) registered apprenticeships:** These programs provide a no-cost pathway to teaching where apprentices work in classrooms with mentor teachers and gain on-the-job experience while completing required coursework to become fully licensed teachers.
- Teaching As A Profession (TAP) career and technical education (CTE) pathway:** TAP is a CTE program of study for students interested in learning how to become a teacher; it provides a fast-track for future teachers to earn a degree.
- Licensure flexibilities:** When a local education agency (LEA) or public charter school cannot find a qualified teacher to fill a vacant position, the director may request a temporary teaching permit or endorsement exemption be provided to a candidate that meets an alternative set of qualifications. In recent years, criteria to obtain a temporary teaching permit have been expanded to include student teachers, occupational teachers, and honorably discharged veterans. The state also created a limited license pathway that allows permitted educators to continue teaching for two years beyond the second or third issuance of their permit if they earn

sufficiently high effectiveness scores on their most recent evaluation.

- **Free additional endorsements in SPED/ESL:** The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) developed and administered an additional endorsement program which allowed educators to obtain endorsements in the areas of special education and English as a second language (ESL) at no cost.
- **Future Teacher Scholarship:** The Tennessee Future Teacher Scholarship is a last-dollar scholarship that covers tuition and fees for teacher candidates attending an approved EPP in Tennessee who agree to teach in a targeted

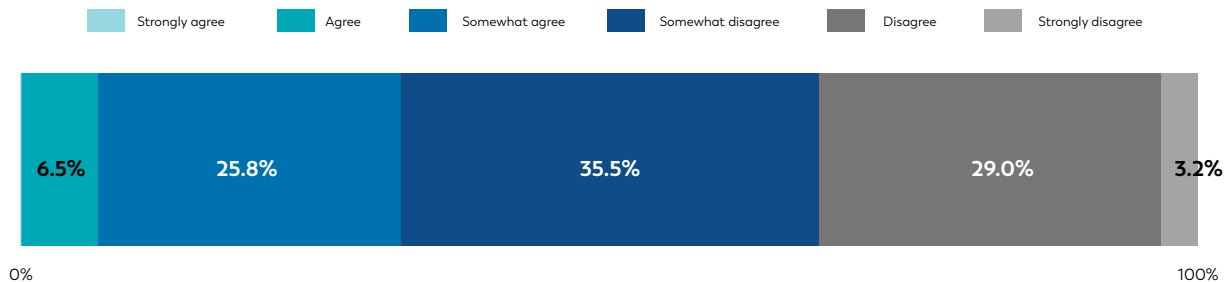
setting for at least four years. Eligible targeted settings include public schools in distressed and at-risk counties or a subject area for which there is a critical shortage.

- **Alternative certification programs:** Alternative certification programs provide routes to teaching through job-embedded and residency models that provide candidates with licensure in less time and often at a lower cost than a traditional educator preparation program.

Despite these investments and initiatives, rural district leaders in our sample overwhelmingly do not believe that Tennessee has strong policies and strategies in place to support the teaching pipeline.

Nearly 70 percent of rural district leaders do not believe that Tennessee has strong policies and strategies in place to support the teaching pipeline.

**Tennessee has a strong set of policies and strategies in place to support the attraction and retention of effective teachers in our state.**



To better understand why these initiatives may not be meeting the needs of rural districts, we wanted to gather more information about which of these initiatives rural districts have utilized, how helpful they have been in addressing vacancies, and what challenges districts have experienced in accessing these supports.

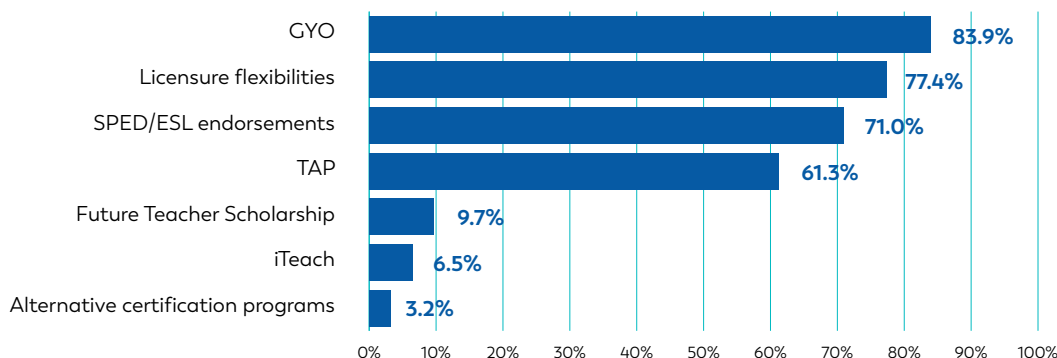
Rural district leaders in our survey primarily utilized Grow Your Own teacher apprenticeships,

licensure flexibilities, the state's free ESL and SPED endorsement program, and the TAP CTE pathway to address pipeline challenges. Survey respondents also had the opportunity to submit other supports they have utilized to address pipeline challenges, and 6.5 percent of districts specifically noted the usage of iTeach, an out-of-state alternative certification program approved by TDOE.<sup>18</sup>



Rural districts have used many of the state-sponsored initiatives to strengthen the teacher pipeline.

**Please select all statewide interventions that your district has utilized to strengthen the teacher pipeline.**



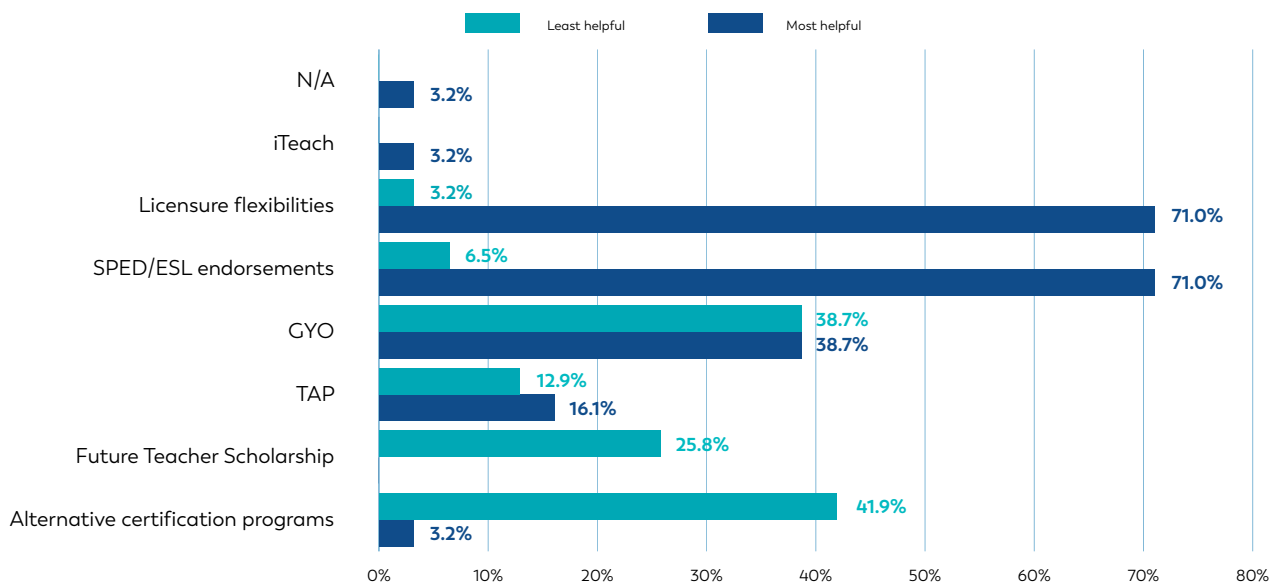
Of these initiatives, rural district leaders reported licensure flexibilities and free endorsements as the most helpful. When asked to expand further on that, districts cited the low cost, immediate impact, and clarity of rules and processes to participate in these interventions.

Rural district leaders have experienced the most challenges when attempting to leverage alternative certification programs and Grow Your Own. In many rural communities across the state, alternative certification programs may not be available, and rural district leaders report not having information

about how to access them. For Grow Your Own, rural district leaders cite challenges with the large up-front cost and capacity that is required to design and implement these programs, as well as confusion about the eligibility requirements and enrollment processes for interested candidates. Other challenges cited include a lack of willing educator preparation program partners, a lack of candidates who are interested in completing the program, and a misalignment between available Grow Your Own candidates' licensure and endorsement areas and the specific human capital needs of districts.

Rural district leaders find licensure flexibilities and free endorsements to be the most helpful of these supports, while they have experienced the most challenges when attempting to leverage alternative certification programs and Grow Your Own.

**Which of the state-provided human capital/teacher pipeline resources have been the most and least helpful?**

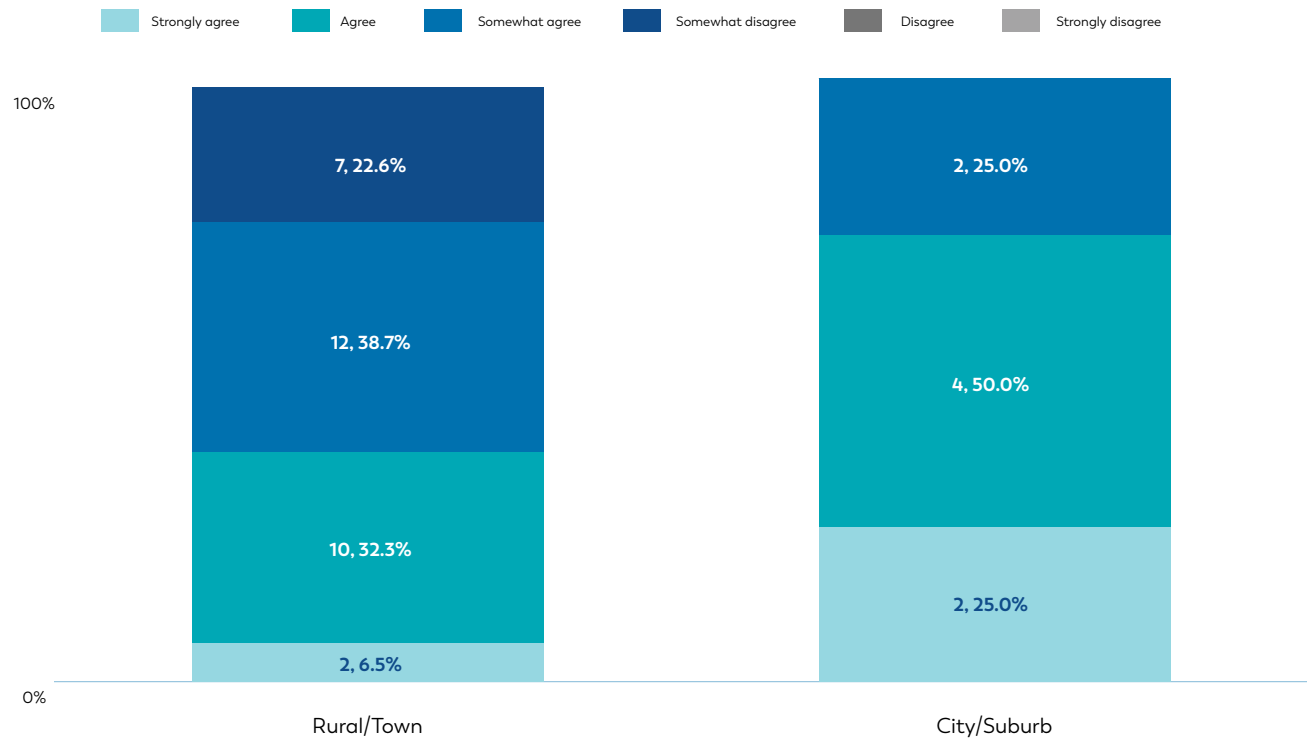


Rural districts have limited capacity to develop and implement comprehensive human capital strategies and desire greater support to develop strong local policies and practices, particularly regarding compensation.

In an increasingly tight educator labor market, robust human capital strategies are necessary to ensure that districts can recruit, develop, and retain the effective educators they need to meet student needs. However, our survey revealed a concerning gap: Rural district leaders in our sample were less likely than their city and suburban counterparts to agree they have strong policies and strategies to attract and retain effective educators.

Rural district leaders are less likely to agree that their district has strong policies and strategies in place to support the teacher pipeline.

My district has a strong set of policies and strategies in place to support the attraction and retention of our effective teachers.

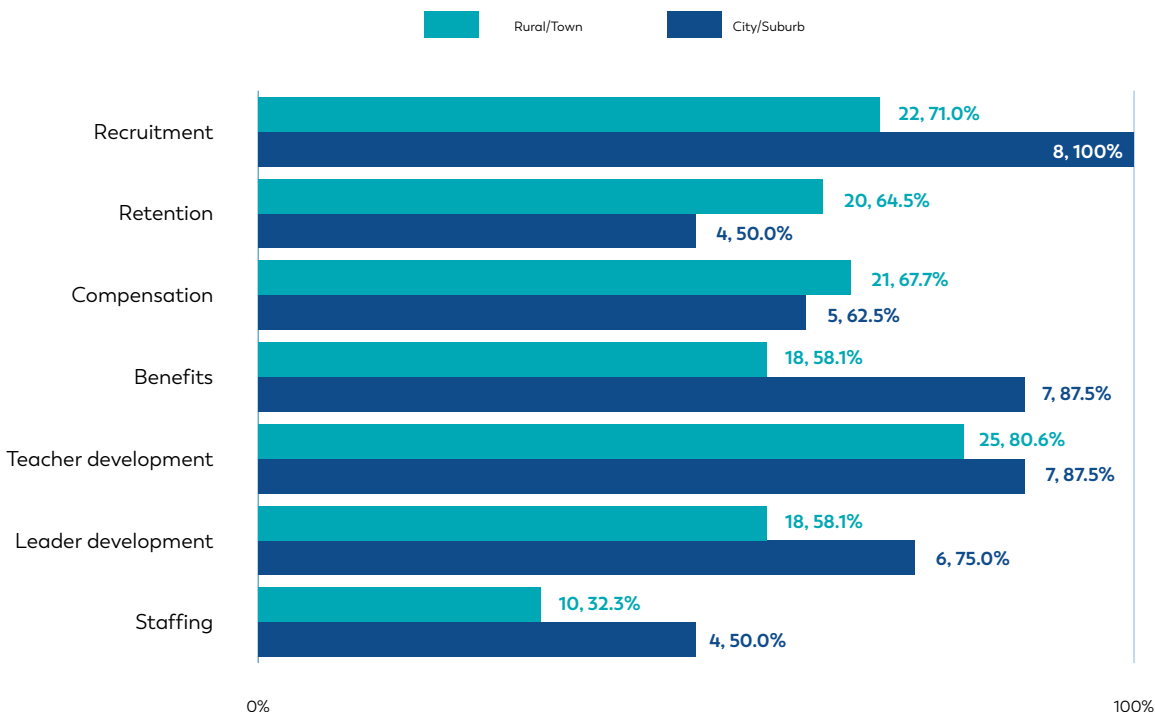


Part of the problem lies in limited resources. Rural districts often struggle with smaller central office teams where leaders juggle multiple responsibilities. This makes it difficult to dedicate time and expertise to developing and overseeing comprehensive human

capital strategies. Our survey confirmed this — rural districts were less likely to report having formal plans and dedicated oversight for human capital strategies compared to their city and suburban peers.

Rural districts are less likely to have formal plans and district-level oversight for human capital strategies than their city and suburban peers.

**For which of the following human capital strategies do you have a formal plan and dedicated oversight by a district-level employee?**

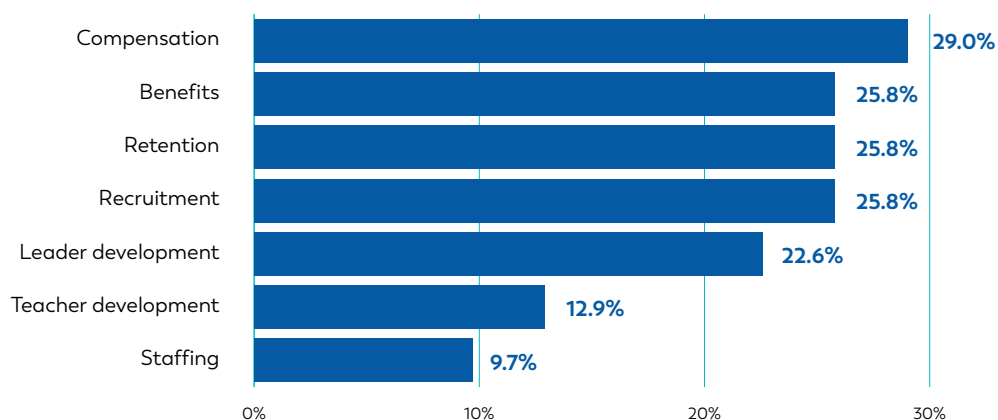


So, where do rural districts need the most support? Given the previous survey findings regarding the underlying causes of vacancies, it is no surprise that

compensation topped the list, followed by benefits, recruitment, and retention.

Rural district leaders most desire support on compensation, followed by benefits, recruitment, and retention.

**For which of the following human capital strategies, if any, do you wish that you had support (either from the state or another technical assistance provider) to develop a formal plan?**



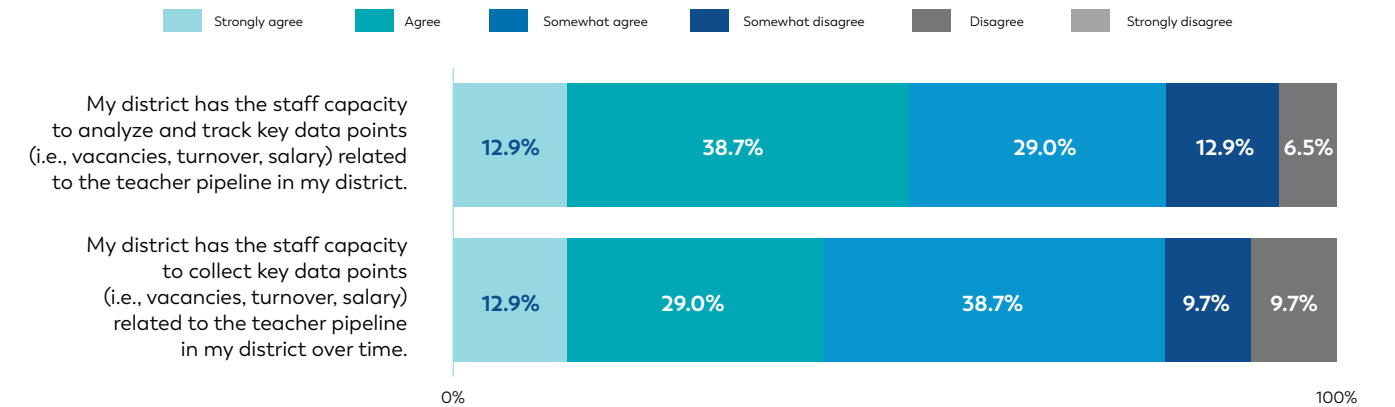
While rural districts report having the capacity to collect and track key human capital data, current data collection processes lack the sophistication to provide quick access to actionable insights.

As highlighted in the [first paper in this series](#), educator labor markets are highly localized, meaning that districts need to deeply understand the data related to their unique educator labor force in order to develop

strategies to successfully solve for challenges. However, we know that collecting, tracking, and analyzing data is a time-intensive task, and this presents yet another capacity constraint to rural districts.

Given the acute effects of teacher shortages, many districts have prioritized better understanding their own educator labor market data, and, as a result, many rural district leaders in our survey reported having the capacity to collect and track key data points related to the teacher pipeline in their district.

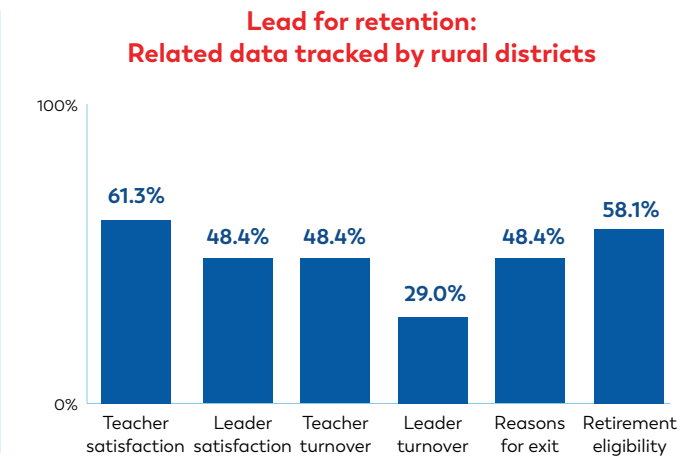
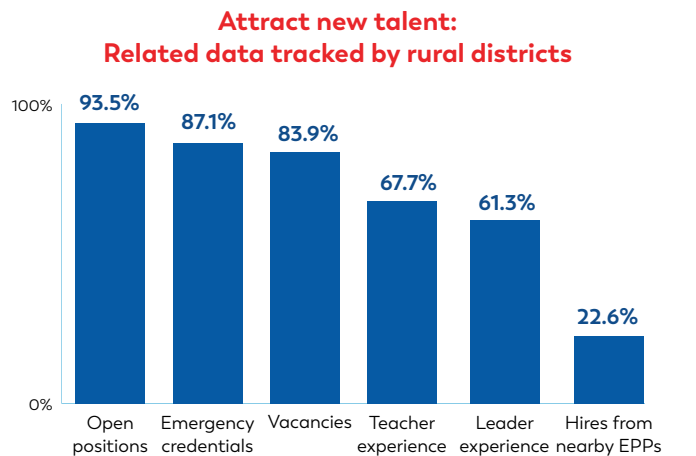
Most rural districts report having the capacity to collect and track key data points related to the teacher pipeline in their district.



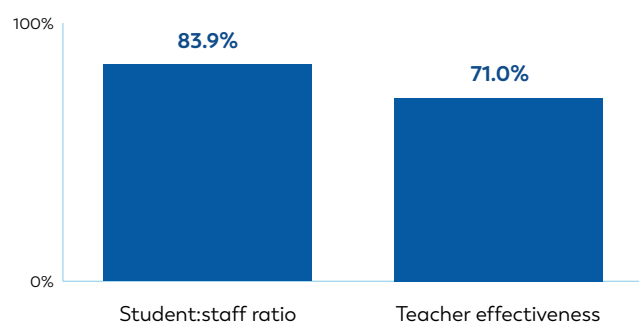
However, when we asked for further details on the data they were tracking, we found that rural districts were not consistently tracking data across the entire

educator labor market. Data highlighted below related to “leading for retention” and the “education industry in context” are being tracked the least frequently.

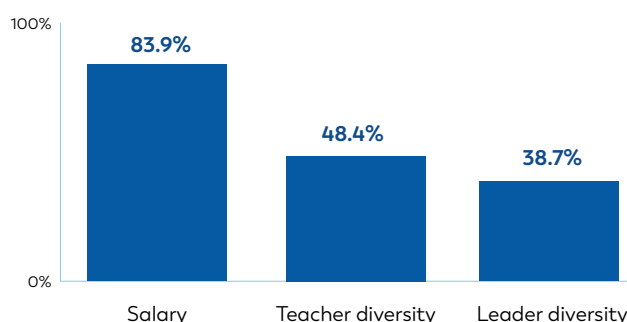
Rural districts are not consistently tracking data across the entire educator labor market.



**Maximize current talent:  
Related data tracked by rural districts**



**Education industry in context:  
Related data tracked by rural districts**



Further, when asked how they were tracking this data, rural district leaders shared that they are using inconsistent mechanisms for collecting, tracking, and analyzing human capital data — from individual spreadsheets to payroll software and student information systems (SIS). In some cases, rural district leaders even reported that they are tracking this data anecdotally or informally and elevated a need for a more centralized and accurate data source.

Taken together, these insights indicate the current data collection processes rural districts have in place lack the sophistication to provide districts with quick and easy access to the data they need to make strategic human capital decisions.

## CONCLUSION

As rural district leaders continue to face the acute impact of vacancies in their schools, these insights reinforce existing knowledge of the challenges rural districts face in recruiting and retaining qualified educators while also expanding our understanding of how Tennessee’s teacher pipeline is serving rural communities. Teacher shortages in rural communities are more than just a temporary staffing issue and reflect broader challenges that come with rurality — such as geographic isolation and limited resources — and continue to exacerbate the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified teachers. While

state-sponsored initiatives have made strides in addressing teacher shortages more broadly, the perception data we collected indicate these initiatives seem to be falling short of meeting the unique needs of rural districts. Therefore, it is imperative that we continue to study how statewide policies and practices are addressing local educator labor market challenges, particularly across different geographies. By doing so, we can foster differentiated educator talent strategies that not only fill immediate vacancies but also build an educator workforce that is more reliable, effective, and diverse.

# REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> SCORE internal analysis of quantity and percentage of early-career and emergency credentialed teachers in low-poverty schools using data from Tennessee Department of Education titled "Educator Experience and Licensure 2020-21."

<sup>3</sup> Ingersoll, Richard M., and Henry Tran. "Teacher Shortages and Turnover in Rural Schools in the US: An Organizational Analysis." *Educational Administration Quarterly* (April 2023).

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<sup>7</sup> Showalter, Daniel, Sara L. Hartman, Karen Eppley, Jerry Johnson, and Bob Klein. *Why Rural Matters 2023: Centering Equity and Opportunity*. The National Rural Education Association (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Tennessee Department of Education. Tennessee School Report Card (2023).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> SCORE analysis of State Board of Education Educator Preparation Program Report Card data.

<sup>12</sup> Amos, Brooke. *2022-23 Vacancy Data Collection*. Tennessee Department of Education (May 2023).]

<sup>13</sup> State Board of Education Quarterly Workshop (May 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> SCORE analysis of State Board of Education Educator Preparation Program Report Card data.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Tennessee Educator Survey." Tennessee Department of Education (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Teacher Certification Accreditation. iTeach.