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# Principal Perceptions of the Challenges and Successes Experienced with Teacher Turnover

Elizabeth Anne Thomas
*Walden University*

# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Elizabeth Anne Thomas

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Review Committee
Dr. Mary Hallums, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Robert Voelkel, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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Experienced with Teacher Turnover

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Elizabeth Anne Thomas

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Fulfillment

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## Abstract

Despite interventions to decrease teacher turnover, there remains a 16-24% teacher turnover rate at one Southeastern School District (SSD) in the United States. There is a gap in practice related to the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the teacher turnover rates in an SSD that are consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover guided this study. Research questions addressed principals' perceptions of the successes and challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates and perceptions of strategies that have been successful in addressing teacher turnover. Data were collected using semistructured interviews from a purposeful sample of eight principals, one from each programmatic grade level. The format for retrieving and analyzing the text-based data was textual analysis, where simple semistructured interviews were transcribed through coding words and phrases as analytic memos in a research journal. The findings revealed principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes, and these specific findings may successfully adapt and address teacher turnover in the rural SSD. It is recommended that these findings be presented to district directors and principals at both the district and school building levels. Insights from the study may offer a positive social change in increasing student outcomes by communicating perceptions and specific strategies that have successfully retained teachers, decreasing the teacher turnover rate in rural SSDs.

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# Dedication

My milestones and achievements are dedicated to every child who has suffered adverse childhood experiences and never thought they would ever overcome their abuse and trauma. Education has been the positive catalyst that has kept me from self-harm and destructive negative behaviors. Education has been the healing agent for my process and pursuit of wholeness after a turbulent childhood. My purpose is to pour into the lives of those who have been hurt so that they may see what the Lord has birthed in me so they may see what He has in store for them. I pray this milestone in my legacy speaks to those not heard, not seen, and who feel invisible, hoping they begin to see healing, opportunity, and purpose in their lives.

# Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to my husband for his commitment to my educational pursuits. Achieving this monumental milestone has been a long road of many sacrifices. My family and I have earned many degrees together, and now have a doctorate! Without my family and husband's support, I would not have achieved everything I have accomplished. I also want to acknowledge my cohort of ladies formed from divine intervention in our doctoral program. The support I gained from them has been invaluable to me, and I would not have made it through without them. Additionally, I would like to thank my friend and sister for her unwavering commitment to me and our completion of this program. You, my friend, are the sister I got to choose. I would also like to express my gratitude to my committee members and the faculty for the support and direction I received to achieve this dream in my academic career. Lastly, Praise be to God, who orchestrated this entire process for me and who was in control when I had no control. I am nothing without Him and everything He needs me to be with Him.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teacher turnover is an increasingly urgent crisis within public education nationwide (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Teacher turnover in the United States is twice as high as in neighboring countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada (Learning Policy Institute, 2023). Since the Great Recession of 2008 and years of teacher layoffs, the United States has experienced difficulty retaining qualified teachers, resulting in a teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas & Patrick, 2022). Schools across the nation are experiencing challenges with balancing student-teacher ratios, expanding curricula, and meeting the needs of the growing diverse student populations, which in turn affects teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas, 2022). The nation's teacher shortage is not being able to fill teacher positions with qualified professionals, which results in high teacher turnover rates nationwide (Maruca & Zapata, 2022). Sorensen and Ladd defined teacher turnover as "The yearly rate of departure of teachers from a school regardless of whether a teacher leaves one school to move to another school or quits the profession." (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020, p. 1) Positive social implications to understanding teacher turnover may result in identifying strategies to promote teacher retention and, in turn, ensure student academic success.

Principals in the rural southeastern school district face the challenge of consistently high teacher turnover rates yearly. Teacher retention is a looming problem for principals in K-12 schools in the rural southeastern school district. The continued turnover in the rural southeastern school district affects student achievement due to the lack of consistency from the constant change in teachers. Therefore, there is a need to

understand the principals' perceptions of the challenges and success of retaining teachers in the rural southeastern school district. Positive social implications to understanding teacher turnover in the rural southeastern school district may result in identifying strategies to promote teacher retention and, in turn, ensure student academic success. By exploring principals' perceptions concerning the challenges and successes of retaining teachers, positive social change may occur district-wide by providing professional development for retaining teachers, thus increasing student academic achievement.

In Chapter 1, I presented the background, the problem, and the purpose of the study to provide awareness of teacher turnover in a rural southeastern school district in the United States. This chapter included the nature of the study, the conceptual framework, and the research questions. The nature of the study provided information on the phenomenon and justification for using the basic qualitative study design. In addition, the study presented the definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitation, limitation, significance, and summary.

## Background

National reports denoted a teacher shortage of 18 percent of public schools had at least one teaching vacancy, while 26 percent had multiple teaching vacancies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As shown in Table 1, the average national teacher turnover rate in the United States is around 15%, affecting rural, urban, and suburban school SSDs (Nguyen et al., 2020). According to USA Today's teacher data, 86% of public schools report teacher shortages; 52% of teachers felt understaffed in 2022, while 42% felt understaffed in 2023 (Schermele, 2023).

In areas with increased poverty, 57% of staff members felt wariness of consistent understaffing (Schermele, 2023). Higher turnover rates are in more rural states, which continue to increase more than in suburban towns and cities (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023). According to an EdWeek report on teachers in the profession, there is an increase from 36,000 vacant teacher positions in 2022 to 55,000 in 2023 (Will, 2023). According to the statistical center within the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (2022), the average public school had at least two vacant teaching positions, and at least 4 percent of all public school teaching positions across the country were vacant (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, according to the Learning Policy Institute (2024), 47 states, plus the District of Columbia, have estimated that 286,290 teachers are in positions and are not certified. At least 27,844 teaching positions are not filled in 21 states (Learning Policy Institute, 2024, National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2023), 45 percent of U.S. public schools report being understaffed entering the 2023-24 school year. Finally, the National Center for Education Statistics reported 351,000 new teacher hires in 2016, which projects a nine percent increase between 2016 and 2028 to 381,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The annual teacher hire statistics align with the teacher turnover statistics to corroborate the nationwide increase in teacher turnover rates.

Studies conducted by the Learning Policy Institute (2024) have reported that 90% of open teaching positions are from teachers who leave their profession. Due to the crisis in teacher turnover, many school districts nationwide are hiring underqualified teachers,

resulting in low student learning and achievement (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Geographically, school districts in the South are experiencing higher teacher turnover rates than other districts in the U.S. (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Specifically, lower socio-economic and Title I schools have higher turnover rates, up to 50% more than schools in wealthier districts (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). In addition, teacher turnover rates are higher in schools primarily serving students within minority groups (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Looking closer at the data from the Southeastern school district state, more than 10,000 teachers left the profession in 2023, up 42% from 2022 (State Board of Education, 2023). In the fall of 2021, there were 49.9 million public school students and only 3.2 million full-time public school teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

The literature review consists of current research ideas grouped in the following areas: teacher turnover, consequences of teacher turnover, evaluation of why teachers leave based on the theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover, and principals' perceptions of the successes and challenges of retaining teachers. Therefore, there are gaps in the literature about principals' perceptions of retaining teachers and the impact on stakeholders in the rural SSD. The study is needed because the SSD turnover rate is consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. The study findings could be used to develop professional development and retention initiatives to retain teachers, decrease teacher turnover, and increase student achievement outcomes.

## Problem Statement

This basic qualitative study addresses the problem of a rural Southeastern School District (SSD) having consistently higher teacher turnover rates than other rural SSDs in the state or nation. Despite interventions to decrease teacher turnover, one rural SSD in the United States has a 16-24% teacher turnover rate. The rural SSD's teacher turnover rate increases each academic school year, exceeding the state and national averages (see Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Southeastern School District, North Carolina State, and National Teacher Turnover Rate Comparisons Over the Last Three Years*

| Year | Rural SSD Turnover Rate | State Turnover Rate | National Turnover Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2020-2021 | 27% | 14% | 15% |
| 2021-2022 | 26% | 18% | 16% |
| 2022-2023 | 29% | 47% | 23% |

Note. These data are derived from the rural Southeastern States SSD Annual School Report Cards, SSD HR Office Database and State and National Archives.

The rural SSD serves 3,200 students and employs 250 teachers in six schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The rural SSD has steadily increased teacher turnover rates over the last three years, signifying the rural SSD's challenges with teacher turnover. The rural SSD and the state have initiated turnover retention bonus(s) for certified teachers in rural areas to retain teachers, reaping no benefits in retaining teachers. Tables 1 and 2 show that the rural SSD's overall combined turnover percentage is 27% over the last three years. The breakdown of teacher turnover rates in each school is as follows: Elementary School 1, 24%; Elementary School 2, 23%; Elementary School

3, 30%; Elementary School 4, 20%; Middle School 1, 33%; and High School 1, 21%. These averages demonstrate that the rural SSD has, for the past three years, experienced high teacher turnover rates. Table 2 shows teacher turnover rates in each of the rural SSD schools. Although these rates vary from year to year and building to building, the overall teacher turnover rates are much higher than those experienced in other rural SSDs nationwide. Understanding the rural SSD teacher turnover rate will fill the gap in practice related to the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the local setting and inform interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes.

**Table 2**

*Southeastern School Districts Turnover Rates Comparison by School Over the Last Three Years*

| School | School Year 2020-2021 | School Year 2021-2022 | School Year 2022-2023 | Turnover Rate 3-Year Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary School 1 | 20% | 21% | 32% | 24% |
| Elementary School 2 | 21% | 21% | 27% | 23% |
| Elementary School 3 | 25% | 24% | 41% | 30% |
| Elementary School 4 | 19% | 18% | 23% | 20% |
| Middle School 1 | 23.8% | 25% | 53% | 33% |
| High School 1 | 17.8% | 21% | 26% | 21% |

Note. These data are derived from the rural Southeastern States' SSD Annual School Report Cards, SSD HR Office Database, and State and National Archives.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the teacher turnover rates in a Southeastern School District that are consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. This study explored the perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the principal's perspective. The findings from this study may provide the rural SSD's district administrators and building-level principals insight and a deeper understanding of the challenges and success of retaining teachers. These insights obtained through the findings could be used to develop professional development and retention initiatives to retain teachers to decrease teacher turnover and increase student achievement outcomes.

## Research Questions

Two research questions guided this qualitative study to explore the successes and challenges of retaining teachers from the principal's perspective in a rural Southeastern state. The research questions sought to understand principals' views of the challenges and successes in retaining teachers and how these aspects affect the educational environment. The two research questions will expand the knowledge of the successes and challenges in retaining teachers and use the knowledge obtained to develop effective district-wide initiatives to increase teacher retention and decrease the teacher turnover rate within the rural SSD.

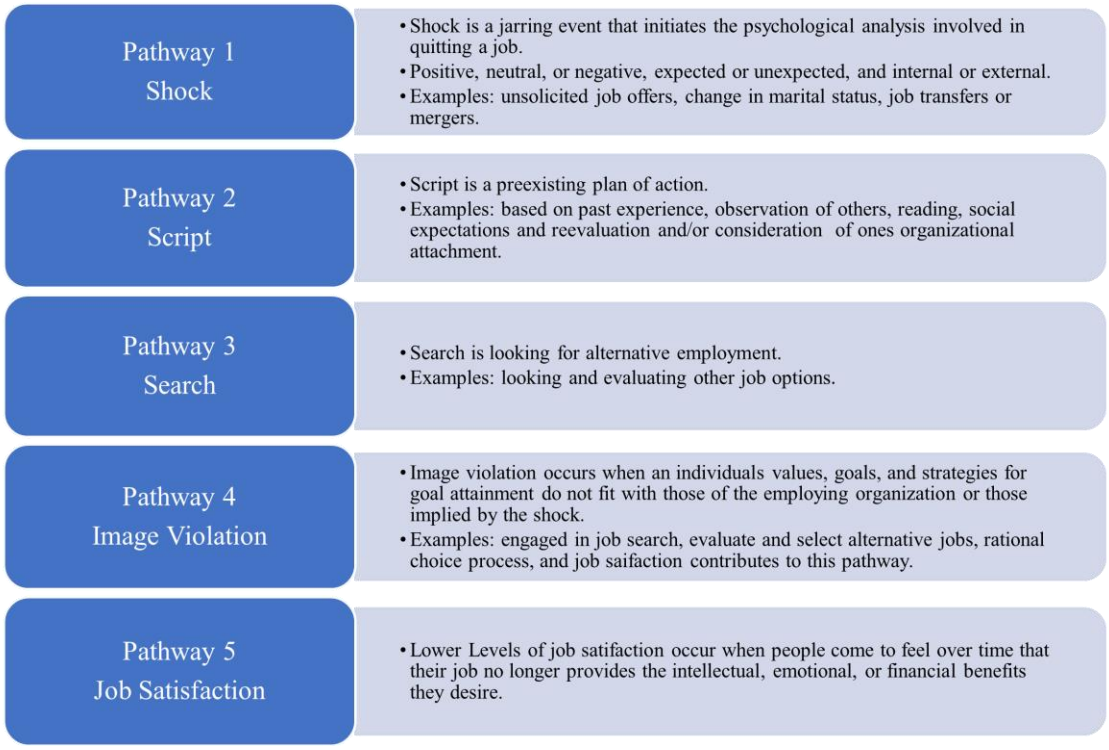
RQ1: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates?

RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover?

## Conceptual Framework (Qualitative)

The conceptual framework grounded in this basic qualitative study is Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. Lee and Mitchell's five pathways to employee turnover are a framework in organizational psychology to understand the various factors contributing to employees leaving their jobs (Lee et al., 1996). The theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover represents the concepts and constructs from both market-pull and psychological-push approaches that contribute to the decisions and the behavior of employees who voluntarily leave their positions (Lee & Mitchell, 1994, Harman et al., 2007). The theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover aided in understanding why teachers leave the profession based upon the theory concepts of five distinctive decision paths that individually focus on the constructs of psychological and cognitive processes and external events that lead to turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

**Figure 1**
*Lee & Mitchell's Five Pathways of the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover*




Note. This information was derived from Lee et al. (1999) publication, The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover: A Replication and Extension.

Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover purposed to create a model that was a more comprehensive realistic representation to explore and target specific individual decisions as to why people choose to leave their professions. The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover theory suggests that employees follow one of the cognitive pathways when deciding to leave their positions (Harman et al., 2007). Lee and Mitchell (2024) referred to the cognitive pathway as how employees interpret their work environment, identify options, and enact responses. Utilizing the unfolding voluntary employee turnover theory model to compare and contrast teachers' and principals' perspectives about the successes and challenges of

retaining teachers will give insight into how to inform interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes.

The logical connections to the pathway of turnover are (a) sudden unexpected organizational changes or unexpected life events; (b) negative workplace events; (c) job offer that leads to a teacher questioning their commitment to the job; (d) job satisfaction not feeling valued; and (e) perception of professional image is violated. As shown in Figure 1, the five cognitive decision pathways are (a) shock or personal, positive or expected life event; (b) script or negative organizational event; (c) search or unexpected job offer; (d) job satisfaction; and (e) image violation job satisfaction (Lee & Maurer, 1997; Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The framework's conceptual key element describes why teachers decide not to remain in the profession. The logical and key elements are explained further in Chapter 2.

## Nature of the Study

Saldaña (2021) suggested choosing a method to help answer the research questions. This study used a basic qualitative research design to address the research questions. The basic qualitative study research design using the semistructured interview process provided the flexibility to implement the responsive interviewing model to enhance the interview protocol to obtain richer data (Naz et al., 2022). Sarfo et al., (2021) presented the responsive interviewing model as a strategy that emphasizes design flexibility and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he/she is learning from the interviewee.

The study's research questions explored the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from principals' perspectives to understand the high turnover rates in the rural SSD. The study analyzed three years of teacher turnover data from the local, state, and national archives to gain insight into informed interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes. The data aided in determining the local rural SSD's teacher turnover percentage compared to state and national turnover percentages. Data were collected through self-designed semistructured interviews with principals to explore their perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers and gain insight into the high teacher turnover rates in rural SSD. The semistructured interview method aligned with the basic qualitative study's purpose and research questions as semistructured interviews offered the opportunity to pose questions and engage in probing questions to gather deeper information from each of the study's participants (Naz et al., 2022; Sarfo et al., 2021). A purposeful sampling of eight principals from each programmatic grade level were interviewed to learn their perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers (Naz et al., 2022; Sarfo et al., 2021). The interviews were transcribed and coded according to keywords or ideas and categorized into emergent identified themes. The themes produced descriptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from principals' perspectives to understand the high teacher turnover rates, inform interventions to effect positive social change, retain teachers, and promote optimal student outcomes. Chapter 3 provided a detailed discussion of the study's qualitative methodology and data analysis.

## Definitions

Terms specific to this study are defined as follows:

*Rural area/schools*: A geographical location with fewer than 150 people per square mile and where schools are 25 miles or more from an urban area (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

*Teacher shortage*: The inability to fill staff vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in the fields needed (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

*Teacher retention*: Defined as teachers returning to their same classroom ("stayers"); mobility, when teachers change schools within the school system ("movers"); and maintaining teachers in the profession (Kelchtermans, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

*Teacher turnover*: The yearly rate of departure of teachers from a school regardless of whether the teacher leaves one school to move to another school or quits the profession (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

## Assumptions

Assumptions are aspects of the research study that are out of the researcher's control, but without assuming the conventions of assumptions, the study becomes irrelevant (Nkwake, 2023). This qualitative research study explored and understood the principal’s perceptions of the challenges and successes experienced with teacher turnover in the rural SSD. The data collection method of simple interview questions addressed the challenges and success of retaining teachers in the rural SSD.

Three assumptions were presumed to support this study. The first assumption is that all principals will answer the interview questions truthfully with authenticity and give honest feedback on their perspectives on the challenges and successes of teacher turnover and retention in the rural SSD. All participants will be volunteers in the research process of this study and will be free to withdraw at any time without any consequence (Simon, 2011, Nkwake, 2023). The participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected by being assigned a number that replaced their name and the name of their assigned school placement within the rural SSD (Simon, 2011). Secondly, all participants have worked in the rural SSD for at least five years. Their perspectives were ascertained to gain specific information on the teacher turnover crisis in the rural SSD. Lastly, all participants have experienced the issue of teacher turnover and can identify challenges and successes of teacher turnover within the rural SSD.

## Scope and Delimitations

The delimitations are the researcher's limitations and boundaries to drive the study's goals and objectives to logically achievable results and findings (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The scope of this basic qualitative study centered around the principal’s perspectives on the challenges and successes of teacher turnover in the rural SSD. The first delimitation for this study was purposive sampling to choose the eight participants based on the criteria of 5 years of employment in the rural SSD, placement in a K-12 school in the rural SSD, and position as a principal. District-level administrators are excluded from this study. These criteria were chosen to ensure the participants had the expertise to answer the research questions and produce reliable findings.

The second delimitation for the study was choosing the educational setting in a rural school district located in a Southeastern state in the U.S. that serves 3,200 students and employs 250 teachers in 6 schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The district serves 61.3% of economically disadvantaged students and a minority enrollment of 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This study includes four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. All six schools in the rural SSD are Title I schools.

Knowledge and understanding of the principal's perspective on the challenges and successes of teacher turnover may aid in developing district-wide teacher retention programs that will encourage teachers to stay in the rural SSD. Knowledge and understanding of the challenges and successes will potentially help to understand why teachers leave the rural SSD and see what successes are in retaining teachers. The acquired data may help to create district-wide goals and objectives centered around meeting the needs of teachers to ensure the best student academic outcomes. The transferability of the findings can be applied to other rural school districts struggling with the challenges of retaining teachers.

## Limitations

Limitations, challenges, or barriers that may have occurred while conducting this study are navigating the busy schedules of the principals and teachers to set up interviews, time constraints for the time allotted for each interview, and potential limitations due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Another limitation of this study would be the participants not providing honest insights into their perspectives on teacher

turnover challenges and successes in the rural SSD. To maintain the integrity of the study, a purposive sampling of participants was selected to gain specific detailed knowledge about the challenges and successes of teacher turnover in the rural SSD. Flexibility was administered through the scheduling and interview process to ensure all participants had been interviewed at their convenience. Participants' time was respected by adhering to the interview time session.

## Significance

The results of this research study filled the gap in practice related to the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the local setting and informed interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes. Researchers have determined that the teacher turnover rates negatively affected student achievement, school budgets in replacing teachers, maintenance of school policies, and consistency in balancing the ratio of new and seasoned teachers (Nguyen et al., 2020). Research has also shown that teacher turnover affects educational quality and equity (Nguyen et al., 2020). The shuffling of teachers to fill vacancies throughout rural SSDs affects educational equity, causing inequitable distributions of teacher effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2020). Nguyen et al. stated, "The most disadvantaged schools are the hardest to staff and are usually staffed by teachers with below-average effectiveness, even after accounting for differences in school characteristics and students' prior achievement" (Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 5).

### *Gap in Practice*

The basic qualitative research study sought to fill a gap in practice related to the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local rural SSD setting. The rural SSD studied in this basic qualitative study continues to face challenges yearly in retaining teachers, increasing the teacher turnover rate annually. The gap in practice in understanding the challenges and successes of retaining teachers will help to understand why the local rural SSD has a continued challenge in teacher turnover and help to inform interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes. The research study pursued an inquiry-based method to explore the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from principals' perspectives. A basic qualitative research method was conducted per the requirements of the program of study, where simple semistructured interviews were conducted to identify the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the principals' perspectives. This basic qualitative study is significant because current research and data for local, state, and national teacher turnover rates show that there are high rates of teacher turnover at all levels of the education system in the U.S. Despite interventions to decrease teacher turnover, there remains a 16-24% teacher turnover rate at the local rural SSD. There is an urgent need to explore principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers to determine possible reasons teachers are leaving in the rural SSD and find a solution to the problem.

Burkholder et al. (2020) defined social change as a social or human problem that needs or calls for a change to improve the human condition. Teacher turnover rates affect educational rigor and consistency, affecting students' academic success, graduation rates,

and the overall success of the school community (Nguyen et al., 2020). The social change to be derived from the research study is changing the academic success of students in rural areas, which can support positive future outcomes for students. The study is significant because it will contribute to and fill a gap in practice to understand the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting, provide knowledge and understanding of why there is high teacher turnover, and why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD. Understanding the teacher turnover rate will support positive change and initiatives to keep teachers, positively impacting students' academic success within the rural Southeastern school SSD.

Lastly, the research study may lead to future teacher retention initiatives for the local rural SSD and other rural school SSDs within the state. At the local school level, the information obtained from this study will be presented in a series of professional development seminars to disseminate the common principal's perspective and provide insight into teacher turnover in the rural SSD. In conclusion, a basic qualitative approach was the best route because it offered the opportunity to collect firsthand data from simple semistructured interviews that will apply to creating a district-wide teacher retention program to combat the high teacher turnover rates in the rural SSD.

## Summary

This basic qualitative study explored the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the perspectives of K-12 principals in a rural SSD. Despite interventions to decrease teacher turnover, there remains a 16-24% teacher turnover rate at the rural SSD. There is a gap in practice related to the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in

the local setting. The study was conducted using a basic qualitative design using simple semistructured interviews to gain knowledge and understanding of the principal's perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers within the rural SSD. Findings from the study will contribute to positive social change by revealing the challenges and successes of retaining teachers to develop and implement retention initiatives to decrease the teacher turnover rate in rural SSDs and increase student academic outcomes.

Chapter 1 presented the focus of the research through the problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, methodology, significance, and overview of the findings. Chapter 2 comprehensively reviewed local, state, and national turnover rates. Furthermore, Chapter 2 presented a literature review of peer-reviewed articles that defined teacher turnover, the challenges with retaining teachers, and the implications that affect student academic outcomes. Chapter 3 outlined an in-depth methodology review describing the research design, educational setting, participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 discussed the findings of the data collection and the interpretation of the data collected. Chapter 5 summarizes the research studies' findings, conclusions, recommendations, and transferability.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study explored K-12 principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in a rural southeastern school district. The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study is that despite interventions to decrease teacher turnover, there remains a 16-24% teacher turnover rate at one southeastern school district in the United States. The research problem was that K-12 principals continuously experience teacher turnover challenges yearly in the rural southeastern school district.

The gap in practice is related to the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting. Limited literature is found explaining principals' perceptions of the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in a rural school district setting. Additional exploration was needed to identify the perspectives of K-12 principals that may lead to understanding teacher turnover in the rural SSD. Understanding the perspectives may promote initiatives to develop and implement in the rural SSD to decrease the teacher turnover rate. This study was conceptualized due to the lack of literature and the gap in the literature concerning the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting, therefore presenting the need to explore this issue in hopes of finding answers to the teacher turnover rates in the rural SSD.

Research states that teacher turnover is an increasingly urgent crisis within public education nationwide (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Carver-Thomas et al. defined the nation's teacher shortage as “the inability to staff vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in the fields needed,” resulting in high teacher turnover rates nationwide (Carver-Thomas et al.,2019, p. 2). Sorensen and Ladd defined teacher

turnover as “The yearly rate of departure of teachers from a school regardless of whether a teacher leaves one school to move to another school or quits the profession” (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020, p. 1). According to Carver-Thomas et al., “The highest turnover rates tend to be in the South, reaching about 16% to 17% in cities and suburbs and 14% to 15% in towns and rural areas” (Carver-Thomas et al.,2019, p. 2). Geographically, school districts in the South are experiencing higher teacher turnover rates than other districts in the U.S. (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Specifically, lower socioeconomic and Title I schools have higher turnover rates, up to 50% more than schools in wealthier districts (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). In addition, teacher turnover rates are higher in schools primarily serving students within minority groups (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Looking closer at the data from the Southeastern school district state, there were 94,328 teaching positions for the 2021-2022 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the teacher turnover rates in a southeastern school district that are consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. There is a gap in practice related to the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting. Limited literature was found explaining principals' perceptions of the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in a rural school district setting. Understanding these perspectives may lead to understanding teacher turnover in the rural SSD and promoting initiatives to develop and implement in the rural SSD to decrease the teacher turnover rate. This study was conducted due to the lack of literature and the gap in practice concerning the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in the local setting, therefore presenting the need to

explore this issue in hopes of finding answers to the teacher turnover rates in the rural SSD.

Chapter 2 began with an introduction of the problem and purpose and explained the need to understand the challenges and successes of K-12 principals in a rural southeastern school district. The chapter began by discussing the challenges the rural southeastern school district continually faces concerning high teacher turnover rates annually. Chapter 2 described the literature on K-12 principals' perceptions of the research study's challenges and successes in retaining teachers in the rural SSD. The conceptual framework utilized as the foundation in this study is defined in detail and aligned with Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover and the five cognitive decision pathways for leaving a job that includes (a) personal, positive, or expected life event; (b) negative organizational event; (c) unexpected job offer; (d) job satisfaction; and (e) image violation (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). This chapter also included a comprehensive examination of the literature outlining the teacher turnover crisis and how it negatively impacts schools nationwide. It specifically looks at the principal's perceptions of the challenges and successes that affect teacher turnover and decisions on why teachers leave the profession.

## Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library was used to find current, within the last ten years, and peer-reviewed literature and dissertations to collect research for this study. Within the Walden Library, the following databases were used: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Sage Journals, EBSCOhost, Education Source, Pro Quest, and Google Scholar.

U.S. Departments of Education, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the RAND Corporation were referenced for education statistics. Key terms were used to conduct searches: turnover, retention, rural schools, hiring, leadership, followership, crisis, principals' role, and teacher support. The following key phrases were used to conduct research: teacher turnover rates, trouble with teacher turnover, teacher turnover crisis, principal's role in a teacher shortage, why teachers leave the profession, teacher turnover in rural schools, rural school districts teacher shortage, teacher shortage in the U.S., challenges with turnover, retaining teachers, success strategies in retaining teachers, how to retain teachers, retention strategies for rural schools, and social changes associated with teacher turnover.

The searches for supporting literature were purposely initiated to be peer-reviewed scholarly sources published within the last ten years, except for seminal works for the conceptual framework. Reading the abstracts of each article provided information to assess its applicability to the research topic. Annotations were written to document relevant information to aid in maintaining categorized topics and present the findings to use as sources for the research study. Intentional thought was given to using specific Boolean phrases throughout the research process to concentrate the search more closely on the research topic. As they were relevant, references within dissertations and articles were reviewed and utilized for the research study. Finally, Google Scholar was used to find additional research articles to access an even broader network of sources.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study is Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. Lee and Mitchell's five pathways to employee turnover are a framework in organizational psychology to understand the various factors contributing to employees leaving their jobs (Lee & Mitchell, 1996). The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover represents the concepts and constructs from both market-pull and psychological-push approaches that contribute to the decisions and the behavior of employees who voluntarily leave their positions (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The unfolding model aligned with exploring the perceptions of principals' knowledge and understanding of the success and challenges in retaining teachers by exploring why teachers leave the profession.

Lee and Mitchell's model of voluntary employee turnover is based on the concepts of five distinctive decision paths that individually focus on the constructs of psychological and cognitive processes and external events (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The four cognitive decision pathways include (a) personal, positive, or expected life events; (b) negative organizational events; (c) unexpected job offers; (d) job satisfaction; and (e) image violation (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The research study aimed to explore and examine the challenges and successes principals have in retaining teachers.

Research shows employee turnover has been an ongoing organizational crisis for a century (Abdolmaleki et al., 2024). Scholars and practitioners have been researching and developing systematic methods to identify why employees leave organizations to strategically develop retention plans to retain employees (Abdolmaleki et al., 2024).

Studies have shown that turnover within organizations is very costly in terms of hiring and replacement expenses, costing the institution 90% to 200 % of annual salaries and reducing financial performance (Abdolmaleki et al., 2024). In addition to the momentary deficit incurred from turnover, the human and social capital aspect is often lost in the organization's diversity, declining the institution's competitive edge from the loss to other competitors (Abdolmaleki et al., 2024).

**Lee & Mitchell, (1994). Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover**

Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover was derived from March and Simon's (1958) theory of voluntary employee turnover, focusing on job dissatisfaction and an employee's departure from an organization (Lee et al., 1996). March and Simon's theory of voluntary employee turnover centered around the connections between job attitudes and employee turnover regarding how job dissatisfaction leads to leaving (Lee et al., 1996). March and Simon's voluntary employee turnover theory was developed from paradigm-based or repeated patterns in employee's decisions to leave their job and cumulative in increasing by continuous additions of reasons why employees leave their jobs, resulting in a broader gap in understanding what induces employees to quit their jobs (Lee et al., 1996). This prior research has solely been based on perceived job alternatives and satisfaction (Lee et al., 1996).

Lee and Mitchell sought to expand March and Simon's theory by addressing the idea that factors other than job satisfaction and other job alternatives influence turnover (Lee et al., 1996). In addition, March and Simon's theoretical model and Lee and Mitchell proposed that the image theory (Beach, 1993) combined with the theory of

voluntary turnover could provide a broader conceptual framework for understanding an employee's reason for leaving their job (Lee et al., 1996). Beach (1993) proposed voluntary employee turnover as images identified as principles, goals, and plans. Beach developed the image theory, defining the first image as principles where a specific goal is intended, the second image as the future state of events that would result from the attainment of the goals, the third image as plans implemented to attain the goals, and the fourth image as the results of the plan (Beach, 1993).

Lee and Mitchell (1994) redefined the voluntary employee turnover theory by developing the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover identifies five decision pathways that explain why employees leave their positions to understand an individual's motivation to leave their job. More specifically, the model examines employee turnover by identifying the psychological or decision-making processes involved in the decision to leave a job (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006, Hom et al., 2017). The benefit of the model is that it provides the ability to identify the types of events that cause employees to begin the turnover process and eventually leave their positions (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006, Hom et al., 2017). Principals equipped with this decision-making process information can better anticipate, manage, and mitigate possible turnover situations by identifying turnover behavior and hopefully retaining a teacher who may have been planning to leave (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006). Moreover, the model provides insight to employers to understand the employee's reason for leaving to make structural changes, retention strategies, or incentives to retain employees (Hom et al., 2017). Specifically, Lee & Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of

voluntary employee turnover purposed to create a model that was a more comprehensive realistic representation to explore and target specific individual decisions as to why people choose to leave their professions. The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover theory suggests that employees follow one of the cognitive pathways when deciding to leave their positions. Lee and Mitchell (1994) referred to the cognitive pathways as to in what manner employees interpret their work environment, identify options, and enact responses.

The theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover represents the concepts and constructs from both market-pull and psychological-push approaches that contribute to the decisions and the behavior of employees who voluntarily leave their positions (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Lee and Mitchell based their model on the precedence of the “shock” factor or “shock to the system” that influences an employee’s decision to leave their job (Lee et al., 1996). Lee et al. (1996) explained shock as the psychological action or reaction that precedes a decision to quit a job. Shocks are upsetting or unexpected life events that initiate an individual's thought process and the decision to quit a job (Lee et al., 1996). The shock can elicit a sudden or quick psychological response to a life event to a highly thought-out rational response to a life event (Lee et al., 1996).

The theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover will help to understand why teachers leave the profession based upon the theory concepts of five distinctive decision paths that individually focus on the constructs of psychological and cognitive processes and external events (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). These five cognitive decision pathways include (a) personal, positive, or expected/unexpected life events; (b)

negative organizational events; (c) unexpected job offers; (d) job satisfaction; and (e) image violation (Lee et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994,).

### *Personal, Positive, or Expected/Unexpected Life Event: Decision Pathway 1*

The first decision pathway is a *personal, positive, or expected/unexpected life event* when a shock activates a preexisting plan to leave a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1999). An example of this pathway is if an employee has a plan, but an unexpected event forces an immediate decision to quit.

### *Negative Organizational Event: Decision Pathway 2*

The second pathway, *negative organizational event,* happens when shock prompts an employee to quit immediately due to an abhorrent workplace event (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). An example of pathway 2 is if an organizational leader asks a subordinate to do something illegal (Lee et al., 2017; Lee et al., 1999; Morrell et al., 2008).

### *Unexpected Job Offer: Decision Pathway 3*

The third pathway is an *unexpected job offer* that causes the employee to question their current commitment to their job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). An example would be if an employee received an unexpected invitation to apply for a more attractive job opportunity (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1999).

### *Job Satisfaction: Decision Pathway 4*

The fourth pathway is *job satisfaction,* when an employee's dissatisfaction induces one to leave or quit a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1999).

### *Image Violation: Decision Pathway 5*

The fifth pathway is *image violation*, which refers to when an employee perceives that their image or self-concept is being violated or compromised within the organization (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This employee perception may arise due to feelings of personal or ethical values being compromised, unfairly or unjustly treated, personal morals and values not aligned, or uncertainty about expectations and/or responsibilities (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1999).

In a qualitative study by Sharif et al. (2021), researchers found that employees' reasons for leaving were unrelated to organizational support and job satisfaction. Three hundred forty-one employees took a seven-point Likert scale survey. Researchers also found that employees' mental connection increased their relationship between organizational support and job satisfaction (Sharif et al., 2021). In summation, utilizing the unfolding voluntary employee turnover theory model to compare and contrast principals' perspectives about the successes and challenges of retaining teachers gave insight into how to inform interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes.

## Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Chapter 1 outlined, in the background section, current research supporting the purpose of this basic qualitative study and provided a synopsis of the theory and perceptions of the study's topic through meaningful literature. Chapter 2 presented a comprehensive examination of the current research to substantiate the gap in knowledge of the principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the

rural SSD. Examining current literature concerning teacher turnover provides a concerted explanation for the need for the study. The focus of the examination intended to conclude why teachers leave the profession and determine the principals' perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers. The literature review consisted of current research ideas grouped in the following areas: teacher turnover, consequences of teacher turnover, evaluation of why teachers leave based on Lee and Mitchell's (1994) theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover, principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers, the gaps in the literature about principals' perceptions of retaining teachers, and the impact on stakeholder in the rural SSD.

This research study examined principals' perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers and the strategies that have successfully addressed teacher turnover in the rural SSD. The literature review is comprised of topics significant to the study, including (a) principals' understanding of why teachers leave; (b) strategies to decrease teacher turnover; and (c) principals' understanding of the success and challenges related to retaining teachers. The results of this study identified the challenges and successes of retaining teachers. The results may help to develop and implement retention initiatives to decrease the teacher turnover rate in the rural SSD and, in turn, increase student academic outcomes.

**Teacher Shortage**

Teacher shortages are not a new problem in education, but they have been a reoccurring issue that has become an ongoing "silent crisis" in the United States (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Teacher shortages across the nation primarily affect

rural and urban districts and are more severe in southeastern states in the United States (Nguyen, 2020; Tran et al., 2020). Teacher shortages affect a principal's ability to staff open teaching positions, affecting students' academic success (Tran et al., 2020). Principals have the most difficulty staffing the content areas of mathematics, science, foreign language, and special education (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Although these content areas are not affected as much by the teacher shortage compared to other content areas, in contrast, fewer teachers entering the math and science field to fill the positions of teachers leaving these positions (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). This results in principals having difficulty filling vacant positions, forcing them to hire underqualified or non-licensed teachers to fill vacancies.

Principals in rural areas face the challenges of retaining and recruiting teachers due to high-poverty areas, low pay, limited resources, and geographic isolation (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Principals often have a limited applicant pool of prospective teacher candidates in rural areas, making recruiting and filling positions difficult (Taie & Goldring, 2017; Tran et al., 2020). The lack of qualified candidates mandates principals to fill positions with underqualified and inexperienced teachers. School districts serving high minority and or high-poverty areas have an increased chance of having inexperienced and underqualified teachers filling their positions (Maready et al., 2021). Research has indicated that it takes three years for a qualified teacher to reach the level of fidelity for students to reach expected student outcomes and mastery (Maready et al., 2021). In summation, the teacher shortage afflicting the nation causes challenges for

principals to hire highly qualified teachers, affecting the academic success of students in unprivileged districts (Carothers et al., 2019; Maready et al., 2021).

**Teacher Retention**

In addition to understanding the teacher turnover crisis nationwide, it is critical to understand teacher retention and how to retain teachers to decrease teacher turnover within our schools. Teacher retention is defined as a teacher who stays in the teaching profession at a school, district, or state level for a given period of time (Gerald, 2019). A recent study of 31 out of 50 participating states found that 82,000 teachers were underqualified, and there were more than 5,000 open teaching positions to be filled across the U.S. Low-income, underserved communities, and high-minority populations school districts are experiencing the highest impact in retaining teachers (Gerald, 2019). As a result of the teacher shortage crisis, studies have focused on factors such as teachers' choices to remain or leave the profession, expenditures associated with declining teacher turnover, and the consequences teacher retention has on students' academic outcomes (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018).

Research has provided evidence of the effects of teacher shortages and retention within school districts nationwide. Research has proven that qualified teachers are crucial to student achievement; therefore, modifying public, state, and federal policy to manipulate teacher qualifications to fill positions affects students' proficiency and achievement (Antony & Elangkumaran, 2020). Individual state and local school districts nationwide have explored various avenues to fill teaching positions, such as alternative routes to teachers' certifications and lowering the certification requirements for teaching

positions. Recent national projections predict that 375,000 inexperienced teachers by the year 2024 will be recruited and hired to fill the vacancies of retiring and resigning teachers (Floden et al., 2020). Understanding teachers' decisions to leave the profession will allow school districts to design effective intervention plans and higher level learning conditions to combat the root causes of why teachers leave the profession (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019).

Garcia et al. (2019) focused on the severity of the teacher shortage in the United States and why finding ways to retain teachers is imperative. The researchers found that low pay, challenging school environments, and weak professional development support and recognition contributed to teacher turnover. The researcher also found that the teacher shortage was more severe than previous research and that high poverty schools had suffered the most from a shortage of credentialed teachers. Additional findings from the research brief included that the teacher shortage was even more severe if factoring in teacher credentials. This research brief is essential to the research study because the brief analyzes the severity of the teacher shortage in the United States and highlights the factors contributing to the shortage.

Tran et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative research design study focusing on rural SSDs' challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers. They found specific themes from rural schools, such as administrative support, family-oriented culture, strong community relations, strong networks between teachers, students, and the community, and smaller class sizes with increased autonomy. Themes regarding challenges were small-town politics, cultural isolation, and lack of economic opportunities. This is important to the

research study because it focuses on the teachers' perspectives on working in rural educational settings. The teachers' perspectives are essential in understanding the teacher's point of view concerning teacher turnover.

Sutcher et al. (2019) focused on new hires, re-hires, projected hires, attrition, and evaluating policy strategies to improve teacher recruitment and retention. They found four factors that contributed to the teacher shortage: a decline in enrollment in the teacher preparation programs, an increase in student enrollment, an increase in teacher attrition, and the rural SSD's efforts to return to the pre-recession student-to-teacher ratio. This is important to the research study because it helps identify factors that contributed to teacher shortages, which supports the importance of the study in identifying methods and strategies to decrease teacher turnover and retain teachers.

In a qualitative research design study, Callahan (2016) focused on identifying ways mentoring from principals can increase the retention of new teachers. Callahan (2016) found that established mentoring programs in schools and rural SSDs effectively give new teachers the confidence needed to succeed in the classroom, and instilling confidence directly correlates with a teacher's decision to stay within the teaching profession. Callahan's study is essential to the research study because he determined that teacher mentorship programs within a school significantly reduced the teacher turnover rate. The study's strength is the use of the qualitative research method, which is the same method for this study. The weakness of Callahan's study is the limited number of participants.

Nguyen et al. (2020) focused on a meta-analysis of review findings from 120 studies of factors associated with teacher turnover. Nguyen et al. (2020) found these factors to contribute to teacher turnover: teachers 28 years+ are marginally less likely to turnover than younger teachers, married teachers are more likely to turnover, teachers who are more satisfied with their jobs are less likely to leave their schools, STEM and special education teachers were more likely to turnover than other content area teachers, teachers with fewer than three years of experience are more likely to turnover, and higher academic ability and higher principal effectiveness were associated with decreased rates of teacher turnover. This is important to the research study because it identifies specific factors about why teachers leave the profession and provides statistical data to support the findings.

Reitman and Karge (2019) focused on Fuller's Developmental Stages of Teacher Concern: A Developmental Conceptualization to determine the critical support needed for teacher retention. They found six themes of support that were most effective in retaining teachers, including individual relationships, pedagogical knowledge, teacher perception of perceived leadership competence, mentoring, professional learning, and teacher reflection. This is important to the research study because it may help understand the critical need to support teachers for an extended period to promote retention by developing initiatives, strategies, and leadership styles for school principals to reduce high teacher turnover rates.

Tehseen and Ul Hadi (2015) conducted a qualitative research study that focused on teacher performance, factors that aid in retaining teachers, and the effects of intrinsic

and extrinsic motivational factors to assess teachers' performance and staying intentions. They found that working conditions, administrative support, and student behavior impact teachers' performance and retention. This is important to the research study because Tehseen and Ul Hadi (2015) identified factors that are important to teachers that aid in retaining them.

Understanding teacher retention and the factors attributing to teachers leaving their positions is essential to retaining teachers. Teacher turnover and retention patterns impact the educational system's structure, environment, and learning outcomes (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Relationships within the educational community have been a focus, and it has been determined that when teachers leave, relationships end, affecting the school community and negatively impacting student performance (Young, 2018). With the increase in teacher turnover and replacing teachers, the interconnections with the teaching community suffer a breakdown, and the interconnectedness of the work teams ceases to exist. The constant and continual response to building short-term relationships affects the school culture and learning environment.

**Teacher Turnover**

Teacher turnover is a continuing crisis in the U.S., affecting school districts nationwide (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Nationwide, rural, urban, and suburban areas are experiencing teacher shortages at a higher percentage than in past years. Teacher turnover in the United States is twice as high as in neighboring countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). Since the Great Recession of 2008 and years of teacher layoffs, the United States has experienced

difficulty retaining qualified teachers, resulting in a teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Carver-Thomas et al. defined the nation's teacher shortage as "The inability to staff vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in the fields needed," resulting in high teacher turnover rates nationwide (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021, p. 2).

Sorensen and Ladd (2019) explain that teacher turnover is the annual rate of teachers leaving including those who move to a different school and those who leave the profession. After the recovery from the Great Recession, districts across the nation began to hire after many years of teacher layoffs and found it increasingly difficult to hire qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). Finding qualified teachers in math, science, special education, and bilingual education is the most challenging position to fill (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). Many states nationwide devised emergency certification permits for alternative teacher certification to fill the immediate positions in the teacher shortage crisis (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). The alternative certification and lateral entry programs developed by districts to meet the demands of the teacher shortage supplied districts with untrained teachers to vacancies (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019).

Schools across the nation are experiencing challenges with balancing student-teacher ratios, expanding curricula, and meeting the needs of the growing diverse student populations, which in turn affects teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). In response, the state board of education is adopting alternate routes to teacher certification to meet the ongoing crisis of teacher shortages. In addition, state-approved online courses are replacing in-person teacher instruction to fill the need for content area curriculum in the wake of not having a certified teacher to teach in the classroom.

With the ongoing crisis of teacher shortages, it is imperative to understand teacher turnover in efforts to combat the teacher shortage crisis in the nation. Carver-Thomas et al. (2019) projected that in 2020, there would be a need for 300,000 new teachers per year, and by 2025, this number will increase to 316,000 teacher positions needed annually. These projections further the need to understand teacher turnover to combat the nationwide teacher shortage crisis. Understanding teacher turnover and ways to decrease turnover to retain teachers will reduce the current shortages and projected shortages more than any other single factor (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). According to a National Education Association (NEA) survey of its members, fifty-five percent of teachers are considering leaving the profession sooner than they originally planned (Walker, 2024). Additionally, research has estimated that fifty percent of teachers will leave the profession after five years of service, and one-third will leave within the first three years of service (McBrayer & Melton, 2018). Statistically, the teaching profession has a higher turnover than any other profession (McBrayer & Melton, 2018).

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) focused on teacher turnover rates and school effectiveness concerning the academic and financial cost of student success and rural SSD budgets. They found that higher turnover rates adversely affected the Southern States in math, science, special education, English, and world languages. The highest turnover rates trend highest in the South, reaching upwards to 16% to 17% in cities and suburbs and 14% to 15% in towns and rural areas. (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 6). Additionally, higher teacher turnover rates occurred in schools serving students of color, low-income families, and teachers of color. Furthermore,

teacher turnover rates were associated with a need for principal support, low teacher salaries, and alternative teacher certifications. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond's (2019) study is essential to the research study because it identifies specific elements that affect teacher turnover rates and provides national teacher turnover data. The study informed this study by connecting the national data to the state and local data to show a problem concerning teacher turnover rates. The study's strength is the correlation between national and state turnover data determining the nationwide teacher turnover crisis. The study's weakness is the need for more research specific to individual school districts.

Fuller et al. (2018) focused on the wide range of negative consequences of teacher turnover. The research brief noted specific areas affected in the educational environment due to high teacher turnover. Teacher turnover contributed to teacher shortages and negatively affected curricular cohesiveness and teacher-student relationships, interfered with adopting a shared school vision, and led to an increase in inexperienced teachers. They found that administrative support, working conditions, and school climate contributed to teacher turnover. With the support of rural school SSD leaders and state policymakers influencing external factors such as salaries and funding, teacher turnover rates, and principal support, turnover rates improved. The strength of this research brief is the examination of teacher turnover and support factors that positively affect teacher turnover rates. The study's weakness is that the brief is a general overview that is not specific to a single district.

Sutcher et al. (2019) focused on identifying the cause and solutions to the teacher shortage in the United States. They found that the demand for teachers will increase because the school-age population will increase by about three million children. The teacher supply decreased due to the need for more enrollment in teacher preparation programs. This is important to this research study because it identified causes and solutions for decreasing teacher turnover rates.

## Role of the Principal

### *Principal Leadership & Support*

The role of the principal is influential in the decision-making process of teachers' choices to stay or leave their positions. When principals can identify and understand why teachers leave and the factors contributing to those decisions, they may begin to retain their teachers (Babo & Petty, 2019). Research shows a direct connection between retaining teachers and principal leadership (Sulit, 2020). Principal leadership contributes and is crucial in recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers. Retaining teachers begins with influential school leaders, whereas effective principals employ leadership to enhance the school environment's teaching practices and increase student achievement (Tosh & Doss, 2019). Influential school leaders implement practices such as communicating the school's shared mission and vision, implementing a shared expectation for high student achievement, identifying roles and responsibilities, and providing meaningful professional development (Tosh & Doss, 2019).

The principal's leadership approach affects the school culture and climate, teachers' attitudes toward teaching and students, interpersonal staff relationships and

morals, and student achievement (Wood et al., 2018). Principals are vital in managing staff and educators, the instructional leader, building facilities, and school infrastructure (Kempa et al., 2017). The ability to effectively manage all these areas influences how the staff views and perceives the school principal (Kempa et al., 2017). Research supports how teachers perceive their work environment, which relates to how they perceive their principals (Modan, 2019). Teachers' view of their principal is intricately linked to how they perceive their working school environment (Modan, 2019). Positive, influential principal leadership may promote a collaborative working environment that fosters a positive school culture and climate for the school's and students' overall success (Kempa et al., 2017).

A recent study by Furner and McCulla (2017) investigated strategies principals could implement to create a school culture that would increase teacher and student performance. Furner and McCulla (2017) found that principals' leadership practices influenced school culture and teacher retention. The researchers categorized teachers as learners who were concerned, confident, serious, or focused. Depending on the stage of the teacher, the teacher received a different approach and assistance based upon the need at their present stage from the principal (Furner & McCulla, 2017). Through the study, principals learned the importance of understanding teachers' unique needs according to the teacher's stage and experience (Furner & McCulla, 2017). Principals who have developed positive practices to support teachers result in teachers remaining committed to the mission, vision, and student achievement goals (Furner & McCulla, 2017). Principal support is tremendously powerful when the school leader provides

encouragement and positive feedback to their teachers. Positive interactions and building relationships are paramount in the efforts to retain teachers.

### *Principals' Role in Teacher Retention*

Research has desegregated and concluded that the principal has a strong influence on a teacher's decision to leave, and in contrast, the principal has a crucial role in retaining teachers (Scallon et al., 2023). Influential leaders are the centralized anchoring component to the success of a school (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Effective principals pursue and lead high-quality support for new teachers and improve working conditions to increase student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Furthermore, effective principals pursue and lead high-quality support for new teachers and improve working conditions to increase student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In addition, research has concluded that effective principals must prioritize developing and supporting teachers to combat the challenges of retaining teachers (Maready et al., 2021).

Principals in rural areas nationwide experience similar challenges in retaining teachers (Nguyen, 2020). A common goal is to retain quality teachers who are competent in education to improve student academic achievement levels (Nguyen, 2020). In a study conducted by Leech et al., (2022), principals in rural areas focused on why teachers stay and leave the profession to provide ideas to determine strategies to retain teachers. Principals in rural areas determined strategies to implement, such as teacher mentor programs, moral-building activities, and extra support contoured to the specific needs of the teachers (Leech et al., (2022). In addition, principal support systems that provide open

communication, plan development, and autonomous opportunities to gather resources promote professional and personal growth to support teacher retention (Hughes et al., 2015). Furthermore, support systems that overreach in education decision-making, provide professional development, and foster a positive, productive environment will support teacher retention (Hughes et al., 2015).

### *Principals' Influence on Teachers' Decisions to Leave the Profession*

Research has reported that many factors influence teachers' choice to leave the profession. One exponential impact on teachers leaving the profession is the negative impact on student achievement (Young, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that principals know and understand why teachers leave the profession and how their influence impacts a teacher's decision to stay or leave (Young, 2018). Podolsky et al. (2016) research reported five factors that influence teachers' reasons to leave the profession (a) working conditions; (b) teacher support; (c) preparation; (d) management; and (e) salary. Further research by Sribayak et al. (2018) explained that teachers leave due to on-the-job stressors, excessive paperwork, limited advancement opportunities, stringent school policies, and low salaries. Elyashiv (2019) found similar reasons teachers leave the profession due to stressful and poor working conditions.

Researchers Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) expressed that an effective principal is at the heart of the school. As influential leaders, they strive to provide high-quality support for new teachers and work to improve teaching conditions. Van der Vyver et al. (2020) focused on the Full Range Leadership Theory to analyze the relationship between a teacher's well-being and the behaviors attributed to the principal

leadership style. The researchers found that teachers with positive job-related well-being tend to stay in their positions in contrast to those who have negative job-related well-being who do not stay in their positions. This is important to the research study because the study examined leadership behaviors and styles that are conducive to the well-being of teachers. The retention of teachers often significantly relies on the principal's support; therefore, behaviors and leadership approaches are critical in understanding how to retain teachers and reduce teacher turnover rates within schools.

Research has noted that teacher turnover negatively affects the school environment and that retaining teachers must be a top priority for principals (Maready, 2018). Learning Policy Institute (2023) focused on the principal's role in retaining teachers and decreasing teacher turnover rates. The research brief found that principal leadership was one of the most crucial factors in teachers' decisions to leave or stay in their positions. Specifically, principals who provided emotional and instructional support, saw their leadership responsibilities as facilitators, collaborators, and team leaders, often had lower teacher turnover rates. They found that administrative support and style of leadership significantly influenced teacher turnover rates. This research brief is essential to the research study because the brief examines teacher turnover, the principal's role in retaining teachers, and why teachers leave the profession.

Research has found that effective principal leadership can encourage a collaborative, positive working environment, which can promote teacher retention (Espinoza et al., 2018; Kempa et al., 2017; Player et al., 2017; Stover, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2017). McKinney et al. (2014) focused on familiar and professional strategies in

successful principals. The study identified strategies and traits that new and aspiring principals could emulate to provide effective leadership practices in their tenure as new principals. McKinney et al. (2014) found four strategies for high-performing school principals: monitoring student progress closely, attending teacher team-level meetings consistently, visiting classrooms daily, and being well-versed in what it took to improve student achievement. This is important to the research study because the study identified strategies and practices of successful principals in decreasing teacher turnover rates.

Researchers have discovered that principal leadership and support are common factors that cause teachers to leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Research has shown that lack of support was among the most reported reasons teachers left the profession. More specifically, one-third of teachers who left their profession stated it was because of a lack of principal support (Shaw & Newton, 2014; Watkins, 2016). Özgenel and Karsantik (2020) focused on leadership practices and their effects on teacher performance, school effectiveness, and teacher turnover rates. The researchers investigated the predictive level of the leadership styles of school principals for leadership practices according to teacher perceptions. They found a significant correlation between leadership styles and leadership practices. Specifically, as perceived by teachers, the transformational leadership style affects leadership practices positively, while the laissez-faire style affects leadership practices negatively. This is important to the research study because it describes teachers' perceptions of teacher turnover and why teachers left the profession.

Parson and Hunter (2019) focused on the challenges and opportunities principals face in rural areas due to geographic and social isolation, low enrollment, and a small staff body. They found that because of these challenges, principals in rural areas had divergent responsibilities and held dual roles, limiting their ability to focus on instructional leadership. This is important to the research study because it examined rural principals' leadership and how geographical limitations affected their leadership ability. This will help to give insights into educational environments in rural areas and the challenges concerning high teacher turnover rates.

School culture and climate are essential factors in a teacher's decision to leave or stay in the profession (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; DiSchiano, 2017). The principal's leadership can influence the school atmosphere and environment, promoting positive teacher attitudes and engagement (Uribe-Zarain et al., 2019). School culture denotes the feeling one has when in school, which is influenced by behavior, beliefs, unwritten rules, and how things are executed in all aspects of the school environment (Prokopchuk, 2016). Research shows that schools with a healthy school culture and climate have more robust teacher engagement despite the various challenges encumbered within the educational environment (Uribe-Zarain et al., 2019). According to Maready et al., (2021), principals who include and value the teachers' voices concerning school-based policy and instruction and frequently visit classrooms will gain trust to promote a positive school environment. Principals who foster the importance of the role of teachers in the learning environment help to promote a positive school environment where teachers have

increased job satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of retaining teachers (Maready et al., 2021).

**Professional Development**

Professional development is the opportunity for growth in skills and knowledge as well as self-actualization, efficacy, moral commitment, and resilience (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2023). There has been limited research concerning the professional development given to teachers who have remained in the profession (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2023). Providing viable, relatable professional development for teachers is crucial to creating a positive school climate to promote teacher engagement and success. Building teachers' repertoire through professional development builds their confidence to put into practice their pedagogy to promote student success. New teachers often leave the profession due to inadequate professional development and support and feelings of isolation (Bonato, 2019). Providing teachers with continual diverse professional development coupled with a commitment through leadership and collaboration will foster the climate for engagement and teacher resilience (Balgopal et al., 2019).

Research has shown that professional development is necessary to allow teachers to maintain a promising career path and retain teachers (Smalley & Smith, 2018). Research has also denoted the importance of peer collaboration and professional development training linked to strong job satisfaction (Bursey et al., 2018). Posey (2017) discusses that a teacher's decision to stay or leave the profession correlates with professional development opportunities and teachers' autonomy and ability to make decisions in the learning environment, all of which, if provided, will influence teachers to

stay in the profession. Research has shown that a lack of professional development opportunities and principal support motivated teachers to change schools or leave the profession.

According to Geiger and Pivovarova (2018), professional development and principal support are the two main factors teachers should consider when deciding to stay or leave the profession. In addition to professional development, professional learning communities provided value and support and positively influenced teachers' decisions to stay in the profession (Day, 2014). Allowing teachers the opportunity to collaborate and have autonomy within their classrooms has given teachers ownership and confidence in their ability to oversee their classroom learning environment. Teacher job satisfaction is closely related to professional development, collaboration, and support within the learning community (Johansson et al., 2020; Johnson, 2022).

## Summary and Conclusions

Teacher turnover and retention is an ongoing persistent crisis across the nation. This literature review presented the principal's challenges and strategies for retaining teachers. Research continues to establish the causes and reasons why so many teachers across the nation are leaving the profession to strategize teacher retention efforts to decrease teacher turnover. One of the most crucial factors is the adverse effects of teacher turnover on student academic outcomes and the lack of experienced and qualified teachers within the educational environment to secure student academic success.

Principals can provide support, professional development, and a collaborative school culture and climate to influence teacher retention. According to Carver-Thomas

and Darling-Hammond (2019), retaining teachers requires an all-inclusive approach that ensures teachers are prepared for challenges, fairly compensated, provided meaningful professional development training, and supported collaborative learning environments that promote effectiveness and growth. Although other factors can predict teacher retention, the only significant predictor of retention is strong principal leadership and support (DeMatthews et al., 2022).

Chapter 3 outlined the study's research strategy and method. It included the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures for this study. In addition, chapter 3 explained the procedure for safeguarding the participants' rights and confidentiality.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

This basic qualitative study explored teacher turnover rates in a rural Southeastern School District that are consistently higher than in other state schools and the nation. There is a gap in practice related to the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the rural local setting. The study was conducted to understand the principal's perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the rural SSD. Carver-Thomas et al. (2021) explained that the southern states trend in having the highest turnover rates in the rural areas up 15%. The principal's perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers may provide insight into how to inform interventions to affect positive social change to retain teachers and promote optimal student outcomes in the rural SSD.

This chapter presents the methods used to answer the research questions in this study. The chapter also detailed the study's design and methodology, setting, participants, and how the data was collected and transcribed. In addition, the chapter included an explanation of the ethical considerations, the plan for the data collection, and the efforts made to safeguard the study's trustworthiness.

## Research Design and Rationale

Two research questions guided this study: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates? What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover? This study used a basic qualitative research design to address the research questions. Qualitative research is the approach beyond numerical concepts to investigate the reasons behind human behaviors (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). The research study explored the challenges and successes

of retaining teachers from the perspectives of K-12 principals to understand why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD. The participants for the study were a sample of eight principals from each programmatic grade level, who were interviewed to learn about their perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers (Sarfo et al., (2021).

The basic qualitative study's research approach aligned with the method of a simple semistructured interview inquiry to explore the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the perspectives of principals. Additionally, the basic qualitative research design aligned the problem, purpose, and research questions by offering the opportunity to ask the "why and how" by conducting simple semistructured interviews with eight principals from each programmatic grade level (Sarfo et al.,2021). Simple semistructured interviews offered flexibility to the interview protocol and the opportunity to gain additional information from probing questions. The probing questions presented the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the principal perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers and why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Trustworthiness for the research study translates into dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). According to Stahl and King's data analysis methods, the textual analysis will identify and organize common themes from the principal perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in a rural SSD (Stahl & King, 2020). Thematic analysis ensures the trustworthiness of the coding, reliability, flexibility, and development of themes from the data collection to

increase the understanding of the phenomenon (Stahl & King, 2020). The research from this study on teacher turnover in the rural SSD focused on principals' perceptions of the challenges and success in retaining teachers to provide an understanding of the teacher turnover crisis in the rural SSD.

## Role of the Researcher

Burkholder et al. (2020) explained qualitative research as an investigation of an intricate social phenomenon explored through an organic setting by way of observation, description, and thematic analysis of participants' behaviors and perspectives to explain and understand the phenomenon. The role of the researcher in this qualitative study served as the primary data collection instrument, participation in participant interviews, and data analysis (Burkholder et al., 2020). The researcher explored the social phenomenon of teacher turnover in the rural SSD through observation, description, and thematic analysis of the participant's perspectives to understand the challenges and successes of retaining teachers (Burkholder et al., 2020). The researcher is solely responsible for constructing the conceptual framework for this study and protecting the integrity of the study. The integrity of the study was preserved by controlling the bias by taking an objective, disinterested approach to be detached without bias to seek truth without taking a side or particular angle to the participant's perceptions of the phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). In addition, as the researcher, I do not have any personal relationships with the principals, nor do I supervise any of the principals who participated in this study.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to choose participants based on the understanding that each participant would have an insight into the phenomenon the study sought to understand (Burkholder et al., 2020). Confirmability audits and reflexivity from journal documentation, thick descriptions of the study's components, and maximum variation for participant selection were conducted to ensure the study's trustworthiness (Burkholder et al., 2020; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Lastly, the anonymity of the participants and the setting details were secured by changing the names of the participants and the setting to ensure confidentiality (Thomas, 2017). The changes were reflected in the data collection, journals, and transcriptions, and all data was secured by passcode verification and a locked filing cabinet. In addition to the measures taken, the researcher strictly adhered to all policies, requirements, and guidelines set forth by Walden University. Approval from Walden University was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IBR) on 02-23-24 with the number assigned 1053879 by the university's IBR to collect data for the study.

## Methodology

### Participant Selection

The focus group of this basic qualitative study was K-12 principals from the rural SSD. The participants were selected by purposeful sampling to understand the perspectives of individuals with shared experiences and explain the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the rural SSD (Campbell, et al., 2020). The participants are licensed principals with at least five years of experience and varying degree levels. The number of participants was selected based on the rationale of obtaining perspectives

from all programmatic levels in the district since the phenomenon occurs at all grade levels. Burkholder et al. (2020) presented Marshall and Rossman's (2016) ideas that the researcher will collect individual experiences and then discern across those individual experiences a shared, lived experience. Collected unique experiences by the researcher allowed the researcher to cross-discern those shared experiences (Burkholder et al., 2020). The basic qualitative study's research approach aligned with the method of a simple semistructured interview inquiry to explore the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the perspectives of principals. Semistructured simple interviews were conducted to ask the "why and how" of eight principals from each programmatic grade level (Miriam & Tisdale, 2016). The simple semistructured interview process offered the opportunity to obtain additional information through probing questions. The probing questions offer the opportunity to understand better the principal perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers and why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD (Burkholder et al., 2020).

All principals at the individual building levels were chosen to participate in the study due to the small size of the district and the pursuit of obtaining the maximum amount of data. Selecting the eight licensed principals provided a sample size of participants to achieve data saturation because the district serves a small rural county. A concern for participant selection is ensuring every participant is licensed with at least five years of experience working as a principal. The phenomenon the rural SSD is critically facing is teacher turnover and teacher retention. Therefore, many teaching positions have been filled with non-credentialed individuals or serving students with online courses. To

obtain rich data reflecting the knowledge and experience for understanding the perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers, it must come from credentialed principals who have this specific knowledge because they have lived and worked in the profession for at least five years.

Every participant received an invitation to interview that included a detailed overview of the purpose of the interview and the research study. After participant correspondence agreeing to the interview, participants were sent a consent form in adherence to the expectations set forth by Walden University IRB requirements and the rural SSD (Burkholder et al., 2020). Each participant received, through email, the interview questions, and the demographic questionnaire to prepare them for the interview. Participants were interviewed in person at a location that suited their needs at a time convenient to their schedules. Member checking was utilized throughout the interview to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the principals' responses (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024).

Reflexive listening was continually implemented throughout the interview, reaffirming responses to ensure clarity and understanding of the principals' perceptions of the phenomenon (Pessoa et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). When the interviews were completed, each principal was sent preliminary findings and offered the opportunity to clarify any thoughts or ideas that may have been misinterpreted (Shoozan & Mohamad, 2024). Feedback, if any, was added to the principals' responses from the initial interview (Candela, 2019; Creswell, 2014).

## Instrumentation

The challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the principal's perspective within the rural SSD were explored through this study. An interview protocol and simple semistructured interview questions were used in the interview process to answer the research questions for this basic qualitative study. The basic qualitative study's research approach aligned with the method of a simple semistructured interview inquiry to explore the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the perspectives of principals. Additionally, the basic qualitative research design aligned the problem, purpose, and research questions by offering the opportunity to ask the "why and how" by conducting simple semistructured interviews with eight principals from each programmatic grade level (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). Implementing simple semistructured interviews offers flexibility to the interview protocol and the opportunity to gain additional information from probing questions. Utilizing probing questions presented the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of principal perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers to understand why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD (Burkholder et al., 2020).

As the role of the primary instrument in the data analysis process, I posed as a complete participant to a complete observer through the intimate relationship developed through the study with the setting, participants, and data analysis (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The documentation of data in field notes, memos, and journals with bracketed, capitalized, italicized, and bolded text to engage in self-critical analyses of personal biases constantly occurred with intentionality (Burkholder &

Thompson, 2020; Saldaña, 2021). Additionally, observation notes were taken to record behavioral changes presented by the participants at the time of the interview. As the role of the primary instrument in the data analysis process, the researcher intentionally safeguarded against potential bias (Burkholder & Thompson, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

According to Tenny et al. (2024), qualitative research explores and provides deeper insights into the world's problems and data that can be adapted in real time based on emerging understandings and findings from the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection in qualitative research are the cornerstone of the research in that they properly conceptualize the findings to make meaning of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### Procedures for Recruitment

A voluntary participant strategy was executed by asking principals to participate in research compiled to share with the public (Babbie, 2017). The participant's identities were protected and concealed to cause no harm (Babbie, 2017). The participants in this study were licensed principals with a minimum of 5 years of experience in a K-12 setting within the rural SSD. All participants voluntarily participated in the study and committed to providing candid, honest responses to support the purpose of the study. The researcher did not offer any incentive for participation.

The recruitment procedures the researcher implemented for the study were first to secure a letter of consent from the rural SSD's superintendent to conduct the study and

obtain IRB approval from Walden University. The IRB approval process ensures the protection of the participant's rights. The participant's and the school's personally identifiable information was safeguarded using pseudonyms to name each participant and school within the research study. The researcher sent out an email request to all principals to participate in the study interview process. The eight principals were emailed a request to participate in the interview process for the research study. A consent form was attached to all principals' email requests, which provided a signatory section for consent to participate and information about the purpose of the research study.

The email correspondence was sent with a subject line stating the intent for an invitation to participate in a research study. The researcher used a personal email address to inform the potential participant that the study would not be associated with the rural SSD or the researcher’s employment with the rural SSD. Through the email correspondence, it was apparent to the participants that the researcher's employment and position and the rural SSD have no affiliation regarding the study except for collecting data for the intensive purposes of the study. The selected participants gave their consent to participate in the study through email correspondence by stating "I consent" to participate in a reply email, signing, dating, and scanning the consent form. The participants sent it back via email or brought the signed consent form to the face-to-face interview session.

**Procedures for Participation**

Procedures for participation began by soliciting individuals who work in the education profession, have experience, and can provide a candid body of knowledge

applicable to the goal of the research study. The researcher confirmed that all consent forms were signed, scheduled face-to-face interviews, confirmed scheduled interview times three days prior, and conducted simple semistructured interviews with each consenting participant.

In response to the participant's confirmation emails, the researcher invited each participant to share times and locations that would best fit their schedules for the interview. After receipt of the participant's desired times, the researcher sent out an email confirmation outlining the length of time, the format for the interview process, and the interview questions for the participant to review. In-person interviews were conducted at a location the principals chose after school hours to not disrupt the school day. Video conferences were set up after school hours or on weekends as requested by participants to meet their personal needs. The video conferences were conducted privately to keep all information confidential. Each participant engaged in a 30-45-minute interview time. All interviews began with a review of the consent, the option to withdraw from the study without consequence, and any questions and concerns. Lastly, it was reiterated that all written and digital documents obtained from any participant who withdrew from the study would be destroyed within two days of the withdrawal date.

Other researchers who use nontraditional or interpretive science approaches believe that the best and sometimes the only way to generate knowledge about human beings is through a subjective relationship between the researcher and the participants, who co-create knowledge (Babbie, 2017). The study aimed to promote knowledge

generation through interaction with the participants through semistructured interviews in the research study (Babbie, 2017).

**Procedures for Data Collection**

Thomas (2017) explained that face-to-face interviews are invaluable in discerning these subtle behavioral or linguistic giveaways to the meanings people might hold. The researcher conducted simple semistructured interviews to collect data to answer the research questions for this research study. The semistructured interview process provided flexibility in implementing the responsive interviewing model to enhance the interview protocol and obtain richer data (Sarfo et al., (2021). The use of simple semistructured interviews offers flexibility to the interview protocol and the opportunity to gain additional information from probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the principal's perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in an attempt to understand why teachers leave the profession in the rural SSD (Burkholder et al., 2020).

The data collection process included the following procedural elements. The researcher assigned participants a number for identification purposes and conducted simple semistructured interviews. The simple semistructured interviews were transcribed and analyzed to determine common themes, and then the findings were sent to the participants for additional feedback. Lastly, the data and findings were written in a descriptive narrative, and recommendations based on the findings were presented, reflecting the participants' voices (Burkholder et al., 2020).

The interview proceedings began with an introduction from the researcher and an "icebreaker" conversation to establish rapport (Thomas, 2017). To begin the interview stage, the researcher recognized the participant's voluntary agreement to take part in the study, reviewed the consent form, and provided a copy signed by both parties to the participant. A scanned consent form with both parties' signatures was emailed with a read receipt to participants who chose to participate in a video conference to ensure consent was documented and established. In the next phase of the interview, participants' background information was collected under the unique alias given to everyone. Next, the researcher outlined the ethical process, summarized the purpose of the study, and the anticipated trajectory of the interview.

Each recorded semistructured interview session was scheduled for 30-45 minutes. The researcher implemented textual analysis for the format for retrieving and analyzing the text-based data derived from the interview transcripts. Using textual analysis allowed for documenting bias, transcribing the interviews from the audio recordings and recorded video conference(s), and analyzing the research journal for coded words and phrases as analytic memos augment the data analysis process (Kohlbacher, 2006).

After the interviews, the researcher thanked the participants for their candid responses, feedback, and contributions to the study. Participants were given a number for identification purposes to protect their personally identifiable information. Each participant was reminded that findings from the study will be sent to them via email, and further feedback will be appreciated. Additionally, the researcher explained that all study resources will be protected by a password on the researcher's personal computer. Any

paper files will be under lock and key in a file cabinet for up to 5 years and then destroyed as per Walden University's requirements.

## Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative study approach, using philosophical assumptions and diverse data collection (Tenny et al., 2023). To find, study, and identify themes, I sought out patterns through contextual information (Tenny et al., 2023). Coding was used to categorize the meaning of the study's data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Consistent note taking was continued throughout the process to help increase the understanding of the data and control bias.

The format for retrieving and analyzing the text based data was textual analysis, where the interviews were transcribed through coding words and phrases as analytic memos in a research journal (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The use of bracketed, capitalized, italicized, and bolded text was used to identify common words and phrases from the text to distinguish patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016). The coded words and phrases were categorized in a table with three columns labeled as follows: column one, "interview transcript data," column two, "preliminary codes and notes," and column three, "final code" (Saldaña, 2016). The categorized text-based data was examined through coded words and phrases to interpret and identify common themes from the principal's perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in a rural SSD.

### *Interview Transcript Data*

The initial stage of the data analysis process was centered on familiarizing the interview transcripts and notes and relating those items with Lee and Mitchell's (1994)

theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. The interview recordings were repeatedly replayed to document and transcribe every detail. Transcripts of the interviews were created and added each time a recording was replayed. Interview transcripts, notes, and journal entries were read, reread, compared, and contrasted to determine codes and themes. Themes were highlighted in the same color to identify the themes across all three mediums. The themes and codes were compared to the conceptual framework to see if there was a relationship between teachers leaving the profession and Lee and Mitchell's (1994) five cognitive decision pathways in the theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover. This process allowed me to identify reoccurring themes and new insights to determine the relevance of the research questions and potentially answer them. Finally, the collected data was organized in a table to prepare for future analysis.

### *Preliminary Codes and Notes*

Using a table, the themes and codes were decontextualized or broken down into smaller fragments and developed into categories (Saldaña, 2021). The highlighted themes and codes from transcripts were organized into categories or small units for analysis (Saldaña, 2016). The themes and codes were translated from words and phrases that became categories to fit into Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) five cognitive decision pathways.

### *Final Code*

In the final coding stage, disaggregated themes and codes were categorized. They were analyzed to find emerging similarities or themes that had yet to be identified. Lee and Mitchell's (1994) five cognitive decision pathways were charted in a table, and the

categories were reassembled to fit into the best pathway described by Lee and Mitchell (1994). This process relates the findings from the data to the conceptual framework to determine the potential trajectories of teachers leaving the rural SSD.

## Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers depend on dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability to legitimize their research studies (Burkholder et al., 2020). Dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are strategies implemented in qualitative research that prove the study's trustworthiness (Burkholder et al., 2020). A detailed description of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability and their applicability to this qualitative research study are as follows.

### Dependability

Dependability is the evidence of consistency in qualitative research's data collection, analysis, and reporting methods (Burkholder et al., 2020). Accountability for dependability in qualitative research also requires that any changes or adjustments in methodology are documented in detail and accessible for public review (Burkholder et al., 2020). Dependability guided this study through inquiry audits, where detailed accounts of how data was collected, categories derived, and how decisions were made in the inquiry process (Burkholder et al., 2020).

### Credibility

Credibility refers to accurate and believable findings according to the data results (Burkholder et al., 2020). Establishing credibility in research involves prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, progressive

subjectivity, member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity (Burkholder et al., 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity was chosen to establish credibility in this study by documenting personal bias in the data collection and research process in field notes, memos, and a journal document (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Member checking or respondent validation incorporates reciprocating data, developing analytical categories, interpreting data, and obtaining conclusions from the participants who participated in the data collection (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023). Member checking encompasses clarifying to understand the intent, which strengthens the data due to the review of the researcher and the respondents (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023). Additionally, member checking helps mitigate the researcher's bias and contextualizes the data from the respondents' perspectives (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023).

Semistructured interviews were conducted with eight K-12 principals to gain insight into their perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in a rural SSD. After all, interviews were conducted and the data was analyzed, principals were provided with their interview transcripts and the research results to provide the opportunity to share feedback, see if the transcript captured their responses accurately, and if the findings aligned with their perspectives.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to external validity in how the study’s findings are generalizable and have some form of meaning beyond the purpose of the study and apply to other situations (Burkholder et al., 2020). It is imperative that the setting and assumptions are described in detail so that the reader can make informed choices and

apply the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). Supplying thick, rich descriptions of the components of a research study offers support for transferability (Burkholder et al., 2020). This study utilized semistructured interviews that allowed the researcher to pose questions and engage in probing questions to gather deeper information from each of the study's participants (Burkholder et al., 2020). In addition, the findings derived from the data collection have meaning beyond the immediate instance of the research study because the data reveals pertinent information concerning the teacher turnover rate negatively affecting the rural SSD and teacher shortage nationwide (Burkholder et al., 2020).

### Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the research methods are based on verifiable procedures, analyses, and conclusions or findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). Ensuring these foundational elements in the research method safeguarded the study's conclusion, verifying that other informed researchers would arrive at the same conclusions (Burkholder et al., 2020). A confirmability audit or audit trail was implemented to document a detailed account of how the study was conducted and how the data was analyzed through notes, memos, and a reflective journal (Burkholder et al., 2020).

## Ethical Procedures

Approval from Walden University was obtained by the university's Institutional Review Board (IBR) to collect data for the study. The approval number assigned to me by the IRB is 02-23-24-1053879. An invitation to participate in the study was sent out to each of the eight selected participants to ensure voluntary participation. The researcher

does not have any personal relationships with any participant nor does the researcher supervise or evaluate any of the participants. Each participant also received, via email, an in-depth disclosure of the nature and purpose of the study and the interview questions to not conceal any information and for preparation for the interview (Motulsky, 2021). Informed consent forms were given to each participant to participate in the study to ensure they understood the agreement (Motulsky, 2021). Finally, all information provided to me through the data collection process is kept confidential and secured by maintaining the anonymity of the participants and the setting, keeping all data locked and secured, and consent from all parties involved in the research process and study (Motulsky, 2021). As per Walden University's policy, all data collected from the study is secured for up to five years and discarded or destroyed.

## Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the rationale for this basic qualitative study exploring principals' perspectives on the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in the rural SSD. This chapter included the research design, the role of the researcher, and specifics concerning the methodology that grounded the study. The methodology section included details for participants, setting selection, data collection procedures, and analysis. The data analysis plan section details the data collected, the analyzation method, and interpretation, as well as how the components of trustworthiness were imposed to maintain the study's validity. Finally, the chapter detailed the efforts made by the researcher to obtain university permission(s) to conduct research and collect data, the

efforts to secure the data, and the protection of the participants and setting identities. Chapter 4 after receiving IRB approval, presented the research study findings.

# Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore principal perceptions of the challenges and successes experienced with teacher turnover in rural southeastern school districts in the United States. School districts in rural southeastern school districts in the U.S. States are continuously searching for strategies to retain teachers. The inability to retain teachers results in negative instructional outcomes that affect student achievement and increase financial losses for the district (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The research questions that guided this basic qualitative study are:

RQ1: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates?

RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover?

This chapter presents the analyzed data results of this basic qualitative study aligned with the research questions. This chapter includes a description of the setting and any personal or organizational conditions that could have influenced the participants or their experiences during the study, all of which may affect the interpretation of the study's results. Such influences include changes in personnel, budget cuts, other trauma, and the demographics relevant to this study. The data collected from this study includes the number of participants, location, frequency, and length of time taken while data was collected from the interviews. Details of the overall data analysis, interview recordings, and results detailing coding information aligned with the research questions. Adjustments and implementation to the research dependability, credibility, transferability, and

confirmability strategies are discussed in the evidence of trustworthiness section of the chapter. Chapter 4 finishes with a summary of the study's research questions and provides a transition to Chapter 5.

## Setting

The study is based on a rural Southeastern school district situated in two neighboring states. During the data collection, there were no changes in personnel, budget cuts, or other trauma that may have affected the interpretation of the study. The school districts house six schools with a student population of 3,200, including four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Approximately 250 teachers and teacher assistants serve the 3,200 students in the district and ten principals in the district. Eight of the ten principals assigned to the district agreed to participate in the study and corresponded with me through email in preparation for the interview. Principal interviews were conducted in person or virtually during an agreed-upon time out of working day hours.

### Demographics

Eight certified principals participated in one-to-one in person semistructured interviews. The data was recorded using a voice recorder and a cellular phone application for backup purposes. Principal interviews did not occur during school hours or on school premises. Two principals earned a doctorate, and six have master's degrees. Of the four categories for participant requirements, the principals had five years, 6-8 years, and 12-15+ years of experience. Of the eight principals, six are female, and two are male. All participants understood the parameters of the interviews and agreed to complete the

confidential interviews for the study. The participants' demographics are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**
*Participants Demographics*

| Participants | Years of Experience | Gender | Education Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| SP1 | 21 | Female | Doctorate |
| SP2 | 10 | Male | Master's |
| SP3 | 7 | Female | Master's |
| SP4 | 16 | Female | Master's |
| SP5 | 5 | Female | Master's |
| SP6 | 6 | Male | Master's |
| SP7 | 18 | Female | Doctorate |
| SP8 | 23 | Female | Master's |

## Data Collection

The data collection process comprised a semistructured interview protocol process in which twelve open-ended questions were created to collect data. Five follow-up questions were embedded in the interview protocol as probing questions to gain in-depth, rich data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The interview protocol functioned as a tool to assist in data collection aligned with the questions that guided the study and the lived experiences of the participants concerning teacher turnover. Before conducting the interviews, all participants were given access to the interview questions and were familiar with the phenomenon due to the present challenges of teacher turnover in the rural SSD. All participants were selected through purposeful sampling with the requirement of being licensed through the Southeastern state. Eight principals participated in the semistructured interview questions created to gain insightful responses regarding the two research questions (Appendix A).

The interviews were completed over two weeks and lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. The interview audio files were converted and transcribed through Microsoft Word for quick written access to each participant's response. All eight principals were invited to participate, and their invitation was accepted via email with a typed response within two days of the invitation. All participants participated in one in person or virtual interview, which took place in a mutually agreed upon location after school hours. The same data collection method presented in Chapter 3 was used without any variations. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection.

**Interview Process**

In an ethical effort to collect data, I followed the plan outlined in Chapter 3. The superintendent approved conducting research within the rural SSD and signed the partnership agreement. IRB approval to collect data was then given, and I began my data collection by contacting eight K-12 principals and inviting them to participate in the study.

After receiving IRB approval, I invited the eight K-12 principals to participate in the study. Each participant responded with the words "I consent," solidifying their voluntary participation. After all principals responded with their consent to participate, a second email was sent to all K-12 principals with an email scheduler to coordinate the principal's schedule and my schedule outside of school hours.

The email correspondence to the participants included a description of the purpose of the study, the interview process, and the follow up protocol. I explained the protocol for their confidentiality, reviewing the transcript, and the opportunity to clarify

or expound on their thoughts and responses. Furthermore, at the beginning of each interview, an introduction and formal explanation of the purpose of the study, interview and follow-up process, and their right to end the interview at any time they feel appropriate.

When each interview was concluded, it was transcribed, checked, and edited for any mistakes. Each transcript was given a pseudonym for each participant's name to ensure confidentiality and the identity of the respondents. After transcription editing, a copy of the transcript was sent via email to the participants for review. The respondents and revisions gave feedback, and changes were made to reflect the respondents' clarifications and align them with the study's research questions.

All interview recordings, transcripts, and journal notes are saved and stored on a universal serial bus (USB) under lock and key in my personal home office. As communicated with each participant, I will permanently delete the recordings and transcripts at the end of five years. There were no modifications to the interview process that denoted a change in the procedures, nor were any changes made in the data collection that deviated from the plan that was followed in Chapter 3. No extraordinary situations were encountered during the data collection process.

## Data Analysis

Ravitch and Carl (2021) explained that focusing on the text details can lead the researcher to new alternative ways of framing, connecting, and interpreting the collected data. An inductive approach was used for data analysis, from coding to categories and themes. All the data was derived from the semistructured interviews. The interview

transcripts were reviewed for accuracy once all the participants were interviewed. The reviewing process began with downloading the audio file to Microsoft Word Transcribe, where the recording was uploaded and then converted to text. The transcripts were reviewed for errors, corrected appropriately, and then sent to the respondents for review. All participants could respond by email to clarify their interview responses. Once participants responded to the transcript request, the transcripts were reviewed for frequently used words and themes. The review of the transcript began by reviewing each line with summary words and then frequently used words and themes. MAXQDA software was used to assist with highlighting the coding of words.

Qualitative research uses coding as the analysis process when disaggregating data to ensure meaningful interpretation of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As the data revealed words and themes, I recorded notes that began to identify categories and themes. Commonalities from the coding began to emerge, leading to themes merging across the participant's responses. First-cycle coding and Second-cycle coding of interviews identified codes, categories, and themes. The specific codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data are varied and important to the overall study (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). The research questions that were analyzed:

RQ1: What are the principal’s perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates?

RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover?

### *First-Cycle Coding*

The First-cycle coding process began by reading all the reidentified transcripts, where the words and phrases were grouped into categories. Common reoccurring words were highlighted from each transcript, which translated into forming meanings and concepts. After coding, RQ1 produced the frequently used words and phrases: burnout, rural area, salary, and training. After the coding process, RQ2 produced the words and phrases: moral, support, atmosphere, and relationships.

### *Second-Cycle Coding*

The Second-cycle coding process produced patterns from the collected data, where the participants' responses were categorized by color in a spreadsheet to find additional emerging patterns. The K-12 principals answered the research questions with their worldviews, lived experiences, and perspectives, producing rich, diverse data. I highlighted repeated words within the interview transcripts that generated patterns and created categories. The Second-cycle coding process produced these categories in RQ1: teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay and external factors, and professional development. The Second-cycle coding process produced these categories in RQ2: school climate and community and principal support and leadership. The categories derived from the Second-cycle coding were reviewed to determine if additional data was needed prior to use (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), coding can be expanded, changed, and/or disposed of completely as the researcher repeatedly interacts with the data.

### *Themes*

As the data from the participants' interviews were undergoing continuous review, MAXQDA Software was utilized to assist with organizing and coding the emerging themes from the collected data. The themes generated from RQ1 are *teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay, and professional development.* The themes generated from RQ2 are *school climate and community and principal support and leadership.* The themes, codes, and categories are disarticulated by the K-12 principals in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Codes, Categories, and Themes, Used in Data Analysis for School Principals*

| Codes | Categories | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| • Student Behavior Post COVID<br>• Lack of Parent Support<br>• Long Hours<br>• Too many extra responsibilities & Meetings<br>• District & State Mandates Post COVID<br>• Unfair or Equitable Work Responsibilities | • Excessive Workloads<br>• Family Support<br>• Rotating Organizational Duty Rosters | • Teacher Burnout |
| • Lack of District Annual Supplements<br>• Lack of District Retention Bonuses<br>• Lack of Bonuses | • Monetary Incentives for Teacher Retention | • Competitive Pay |
| • Geographical Seclusion<br>• Lack of Amenities & Entertainment<br>• Time Spent Traveling Commutes<br>• Lack of Community Relationships<br>• Lack of Housing | • No Social Opportunities<br>• Long Commutes<br>• No Community Buy-in | • Rural Area Challenges |
| • Lack of Mentor Teacher<br>• No New Teacher Training | • Teacher Mentoring Program<br>• Building Professional Capacity with Professional Development | • Professional Development |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| • Lack of Professional Development for New Initiatives<br>• Lack of Guidance & Direction for Organizational Duties & Tasks<br>• No Teacher Retention Training | • Rotating Organizational Duty Rosters<br>• Building Based Organizational Training<br>• New Teacher Training<br>• District Level Teacher Retention Professional Development | |
| • Monthly Outstanding Teacher Nominations<br>• Potlucks<br>• Building Bonds | • Moral Building Activities<br>• Celebrations<br>• Strong Relationships | • School Climate & Community |
| • Building Relationships<br>• Meeting Individual Needs<br>• Transparency from the Principal<br>• Availability & Visibility | • Support and Consistency<br>• Trust<br>• Collaboration<br>• Communication<br>• Open Door Policy | • Principal Support & Leadership |

The themes were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework to construct meaning and connection in the study. These connections further unveiled commonalities and themes within RQ1 and RQ2. RQ1 themes *teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay and external factors, and professional development.* Additional themes unveiled from RQ1 were *teacher mentoring and building professional capacity*, which aligned with The unfolding model of employee turnover theory (Lee & Mitchell, 2017). Furthermore, RQ2 themes were *school climate and community and principal support and leadership.* Additional themes unveiled from RQ2 were *building relationships, trust, and collaboration*, which aligned with the organizing components of the unfolding model of employee turnover theory (Lee & Mitchell, 2017). The themes align with the research questions and the conceptual framework and are outlined in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Themes Alignment with Research and Conceptual Framework*

| Research Questions | Sub Questions | Themes | Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover Theory |
|---|---|---|---|
| RQ1: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates? | • What challenges have you faced in pursuing to retain your teachers? | • State and District Initiatives and Mandates | • Personal Positive or Expected/Unexpected Life Event |
| | • Explain how you challenge your leadership team in retaining teachers. | • Guidance and Support<br>• Principal Leadership | • Negative Organizational Event |
| RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover? | • Which leadership strategies have you used to build a shared vision and encourage a sense of community within your school that aided in retaining teachers? | • Trust and Value<br>• Support<br>• Celebrate Achievements | • Unexpected Job Offer<br>• Job Satisfaction |
| | • Are there practices you have found and implemented in your experience that are crucial to retaining teachers? | • Supportive<br>• Listening<br>• Available and Present | • Image Violation |

This study presents data derived from excerpts of the perceptions of K-12 principals aligned to the themes. The themes were *teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay, professional development, school climate and community, and principal support and leadership.* Table 5 labels school principals as SP protect and provides a naming convention for each principal. The consensus of the principals' perceptions concerning teacher turnover was that building relationships, trust, and collaboration depends on and must be paired with mentoring to build teachers' capacity to retain them.

School principals (SP) expressed the challenges of building trusting relationships with teachers due to the constant turnover. Some SPs discussed the success of building-level mentorship programs and the need to develop the programs into teacher buddies to support teachers individually and help with discipline school-wide. The recurring concern resonating from the conversations with the SPs was the need for district-level mentoring and/or new teacher programs to help support principals at the school level in retaining teachers.

**Table 6**

*Data from School Principals Excerpts*

| Principals | Excerpts | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| • SP1 | • SP1 The increased workload on teachers resulting from new initiatives and other changes designed to increase student achievement has taken a huge toll on teachers, resulting in major challenges in retaining teachers. | • Teacher Burnout & Excessive Workload |
| | • We lost a few to opportunities in and out of education. A few of my teachers transferred to schools closer to their homes. | • Limited Housing & Community Relations |
| | • There is no magic formula. Sometimes, there are external factors, such as the overall climate of education, which is kind of what we are dealing with here again. State and district mandates are burdening teachers, and teacher burnout may influence a teacher's decision to leave. Nevertheless, again, the practices, as I said before, are being supportive, listening, appreciative, available, and open. | • Creating Positive School Culture |
| | • Our district is very much lacking in initiatives, professional development for principals, or anything related to retaining teachers. I feel like this is fully the principal's responsibility from the district's perspective. Our principals need support in this because we cannot always mitigate all the factors of teachers leaving. It is not always a school-based problem. However, we acknowledge we do have some control at our school and would welcome PD that would help at the local level to retain teachers. | • Need for Professional Development |
| | • We cannot control what happens at the district level, but we can, as leaders, build a shared vision in our schools to promote and maintain a positive school culture that builds on a sense of community within our schools. | • Creating Positive School Culture |

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| • SP2 | • Providing appropriate emotional support as needed and making teachers feel valued.<br>• What we do here at my school, we celebrate our folks. We do it in many ways, whether just a small token of appreciation by bringing a breakfast treat, Potlucks, or seasonal celebrations.<br>• It has to be supportive. It has to be intentionally supported to individual needs. There has to be lots and lots of listening before even talking. And they need to know that they are appreciated, valued, and wanted.<br>• SP2 I may not know all the reasons all the time because of a lack of trust, and sometimes I do know, and sometimes those reasons are for uncontrollable things like leaving to take care of sick parents or divorces.<br>• The district has provided little formal support in retaining teachers. Many of my experiences in improving retention came from collaboration with other school administrators in the district with whom I had a good rapport. In many cases, I collaborated with colleagues outside the district to see what they were doing to retain their teachers and gleaned from them.<br>• Celebrating teachers, spirit ware jean Friday, monthly potlucks, celebrating accomplishments, and posting them on the bulletin boards. These components have the power to positively change the school's culture. | • Building Trusting Relationships<br>• Celebrating Accomplishments<br>• Individualized Support<br>• Life Changing Events<br>• Need for Professional Development<br>• Celebrating Accomplishments<br>• Leadership & Support |
| • SP3 | • My staff knows I listen to them and fought hard to get the supplies and structure they wanted. I am also honest with them if something is unattainable. If I hear a rumor, I ask about it. Teachers know I have an open door. I wrote grants to get supplies and technology. I never ask teachers to do anything I would not do myself. I cover classes. I team teach with any teacher who desires it. I am visible and know every staff member by name. It definitely makes a difference.<br>• SP3 There is little to no community support for teachers, and many parents blame the teachers for the failures or shortcomings of students. Administrators fear backlash from the community and often cave to parental pressure. Teachers are villainized whenever they discipline children. No one wants to come to the profession without support.<br>• You have to be honest and genuine with teachers. Have high expectations but be able to be flexible and provide differentiated support to teachers based on their individual needs.<br>• Honesty, integrity, and relationship building are what I practiced as a teacher, and they carried over to my leadership style. I take off their plates as much as | • Limited Housing & Community Relations<br>• Individualized Support<br>• Building Trusting Relationships |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | possible and create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, where teachers feel valued and trusted. You control what you can, such as your response to their needs and the differentiated support provided. | • Reducing Workload |
| | • I am constantly looking for many ways to take things off their plates when new initiatives are implemented. I stayed focused on student achievement and removed responsibilities that were not important to meeting school goals and student achievement. I also had to intentionally look for the appropriate resources to help teachers succeed. In addition, I relied on my teachers for input in the ways they taught and gave them the flexibility to teach to their strengths as long as they used appropriate strategies and positively engaged their students. | • Individualized Support |
| • SP4 | • Weekly PLC meetings are where we look at student data and provide appropriate support. I also have individual meetings with teachers, where I use informal observation data to guide my discussions with them and provide support. Individual meetings are informal, and most of the time, I just have conversations with teachers for coaching and support. | • Teacher Burnout & Excessive Workload |
| | • SP4 The expectations for teachers overall exceed the reality in which the job can be achieved and often leads to burnout. | • Teacher Burnout & Excessive Workload |
| | • I think teacher burnout is a huge factor in teachers leaving, whether at the school or district level. Teachers are burned out with all the demands and mandates from the state and the district. It is a considerable workload, and they can be paid more in other districts or leave the profession. | • Creating a Positive School Culture |
| | • Really, quite frankly, the most important thing is that we foster a school culture shared community of trust and value and, ultimately, a safe learning environment. | • Sense of Community |
| | • School culture and a family atmosphere are keys. For my leadership in retaining my teachers, my priority and my leadership team is cultivating a work environment that is welcoming, happy, safe, and conducive to our student's learning. | • Leadership & Support |
| | • There is lots of time in lots of conversations and open dialogues. Getting to know the staff and their unique needs is necessary to build relationships that cultivate a positive school culture. | • Creating a Positive School Culture |
| • SP5 | • Principals must be supportive, open, and communicative. Transparency and honesty are crucial in all relationships. Creating a culture of trust helps to create a culture of success. All will be well if these ingredients are experienced, not just stated, throughout the building. | • Limited Housing & Community Relations |
| | • SP5 Challenges include finding teachers who are willing to give up the conveniences of the city to | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| • SP6 | relocate to a place with limited shopping, dining, and attractions.<br>• The district is currently utilizing funds from the federal government to provide teachers with sign-on bonuses and funds from the state to increase the supplement to make the district competitive with other neighboring counties. However, once the money runs out, we will be struggling even more to find and keep teachers.<br>• SP6 Since the pandemic, teachers have struggled with an added level of frustration, stress, and pressure. This is due to academic needs and the pressure of success outcomes. Students are not doing well, so the state and the district are adding new initiatives, classes, tasks, and programs to get students to gain mastery in the deficiency areas of reading and math resulting from COVID-19.<br>• This additional responsibility to teach parents places a burden on the school as a whole, especially teachers. I truly believe parents want to help their children because they love them but get frustrated when they do not understand and are unable to help. All of this strain leads to increased pressure on teachers and, in many cases, can drive teachers from the profession. Having to do more, with constant change, leads teachers to feel overworked and under more pressure. The changes through COVID exacerbated this | • Competitive Pay<br>• Teacher Burnout & Excessive Workload<br>• Teacher Burnout & Excessive Workload |
| • SP7 | problem as we had to change how we taught and did business, which added to the stress.<br>• I believe 1000% that my relational servant leadership style has been instrumental in retaining my staff. Teachers, knowing you share an equal load and are in the trenches with them, build connections, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities.<br>• SP7 Staying focused on student achievement and taking away responsibilities that are not important to meeting school goals and student needs is a key component in the challenge to keep teachers. | • Building Trusting Relationships<br>• Reducing Workload |
| • SP8 | • Being in a rural, low-wealth district, there has always been the issue of not having local supplements and retention bonuses.<br>• Pay in many districts is poor, and teachers are wooed into other professions when they cannot afford to stay in K-12.<br>• We are severely lacking in this department. Professional development must have a purpose and meet the needs of the staff.<br>• SP8 People, in my experience, if they have an environment like this one, with close connections to colleagues, they typically do not leave even if there are opportunities outside of the school division for salary advancement or career advancement. | • Competitive Pay<br>• Competitive Pay<br>• Need for Professional Development<br>• Sense of Community |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • I intentionally got to know my teachers and built relationships with them. I had to get them to trust me before we could grow as a school. Learning about them, their values and beliefs, and their families has helped me communicate with them effectively and build a positive rapport with them. | • Building Trusting Relationships |
| | • Open, consistent, encouraging, and appropriate two-way communication with teachers. Listen to them and provide support based on their needs. Veteran teachers need support differently from novice teachers, so support has to be individualized and differentiated. Because of stress, teachers need to feel supported and valued. I had to be international to do all these things, which was time-consuming and behind the scenes. | • Building Trusting Relationships |

## Discrepant Cases

Yin (2014) explains that the discussion of discrepant cases adds credibility to the study due to the original interpretations' various clarifications, descriptions, and justifications. During the data analysis phase, there were no discrepant cases to report that discredited the current themes. Although discrepant cases are an important research element that defines the finding that will challenge the study's conclusion, no discrepant cases were found in this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). First-cycle coding provided the description, second-cycle coding provided the concept, and then the categories were produced. Finally, generated emerging themes were documented in Table 2.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established for this study using dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability legitimize and validate a researcher’s qualitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Burkholder et al., 2020). According to Burkholder et al. (2020), trustworthiness is

established within qualitative research through dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness for the research study translates into dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability is denoted in this study by detailed descriptions of the findings, which provide quotes from each participant, the study's setting, and details pertaining to each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation within the study was implemented by using interview transcripts, member checking, and maintaining a reflexivity journal. The study's design, methodology, and data collection were described and explained so that other principals could replicate and use the results as applicable to their needs in retaining teachers. Lastly, this study presented the opportunity for future studies to investigate principal's successes and challenges in retaining teachers to decrease teacher turnover within rural schools and districts.

**Dependability**

Dependability is the evidence of consistency in qualitative research's data collection, analysis, and reporting methods (Burkholder et al., 2020). Dependability also refers to the opportunity of another researcher to follow the same inquiry process and attain related findings and or results (Priya, 2021). To promote dependability in this basic qualitative study, I utilized a semistructured interview approach, in which I summarized each participant's responses to determine the accuracy of the information provided by the participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

**Credibility**

Semistructured interviews were conducted to gain insight into the perspectives of K-12 administrators on teacher turnover, their challenges and successes in retaining teachers, and how they pursued overcoming the turnover crisis within their prospective schools. The principal's responses were cross-checked for validation by individuals who were retired from the profession (Shenton, 2004). Post interviews a copy of the interview transcripts was shared with each participant as evidence to ensure their responses were accurately recorded. Additionally, consistent observation, member checking, and reflexivity were utilized to safeguard credibility (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

A self designed interview protocol was developed and evaluated by two retired principals who had experience working with retention practices at the district level. Critical feedback on the interview protocol by the retired principals was considered, and appropriate changes were applied to the interview protocol. Employing feedback and changes from veteran principals with experience from various school districts ensured dependability, credibility, and confirmability.

Member checks were utilized to establish and ensure credibility. Throughout the data collection process, I systematically corresponded with the principals to ensure the accuracy of the principal's responses and interpretation through member checking (Creswell, 2014). I utilized reflective listening by intently listening and paying respectful attention to the participant's responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In addition, I implemented reflexivity to examine my judgments and belief systems when gathering and examining the data (Pessoa et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each participant was sent via email, which included a read receipt, the preliminary findings of the data collection based upon

my interpretations. This correspondence allowed the participants to provide additional feedback and/or clarify their responses (Creswell, 2014). Any additional participant feedback was added to the data collection and analyzed accordingly (Candela, 2019; Creswell, 2014). Lastly, I sustained a journal throughout the interview process, which included specific details about the study and my interpretations of the responses to preserve the integrity of the participant's thoughts, ideas, and opinions (Birt et al., 2016).

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to external validity in how the study's findings are generalizable and have some form of meaning beyond the purpose of the study and apply to other situations (Burkholder et al., 2020). The researcher is responsible for providing adequate information for the study to be applied and/or applicable to other disciplines and contexts (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability within qualitative research denotes the generalizability of the research findings (Priya, 2021). I chose eight principals to serve as participants from the K-12 schools within the district under study (Shenton, 2004).

Since teacher turnover affects school districts across the nation, the results of this study may be transferable to other schools and districts. Principals in rural districts can apply this study to their needs to compare and contrast the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in their prospective schools.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the research methods are based on verifiable procedures, analyses, and conclusions or findings (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Confirmability was instituted in this study by documenting the step-by-step data collection process. Documentation included demographic information about each school and each principal participant and collected, reviewed, and secured data retrieved from the study. To the greatest extent possible, the study's findings and results were safeguarded by participants' lived experiences and ideas and not influenced by the opinions and partialities of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). Ensuring these foundational elements in the research method safeguards the study's conclusion, verifying that other informed researchers would arrive at the same conclusions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Transparency throughout the research process and triangulation guaranteed confirmability in this study.

## Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the teacher turnover rates in a rural Southeastern School District that are consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. This study explored the perceptions of the challenges and successes of retaining teachers from the principal's perspective. Data collected from eight semistructured interviews was used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates?

RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover?

K-12 principals responded to RQ1 themes of *teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay, and professional development.* They responded to RQ2 themes of *school climate and community and principal support and leadership.*

**Theme 1: Teacher Burnout**

In and out of the classroom, teachers have many responsibilities that spill over into their personal lives and overwhelm their work lives, often causing teacher burnout that results in teachers leaving the profession. In a rural southeastern Title I school district, teachers face the bottomless depth of student needs, daily responsibilities, district requirements, and overarching state requirements. Notably, eight principals expressed teacher responsibilities as challenges when retaining teachers. SP4 explained, “The expectations for teachers overall exceed the reality in which the job can be achieved and often leads to burnout.” SP4 further explained,

> I think teacher burnout is a huge factor in teachers leaving, whether at the school or district level. Teachers are burned out with all the demands and mandates from the state and the district. It is a considerable workload, and they can be paid more in other districts or leave the profession.

***Increased Workload from New Required District and State Initiatives***

Post pandemic teachers have been stretched with the state requirements of integrating literacy across the curriculum and have been taxed with the overbearing focus on student achievement. Student achievement has significantly declined compared to pre-pandemic and post-pandemic state standardized student test scores, demonstrating a massive decline in student achievement in the rural SSD. Declining test scores have been

presented across all programmatic levels in rural SSD. SP2 discussed the pressure on teachers by stating,

> Since the pandemic, teachers have struggled with an added level of frustration, stress, and pressure. This is due to academic needs and the pressure of success outcomes. Students are not doing well, so the state and the district are adding new initiatives, classes, tasks, and programs to get students to gain mastery in the deficiency areas of reading and math resulting from COVID-19.

The state instituted a literacy initiative for all districts to implement post-COVID. The initiative required all schools to develop a literacy plan and/or a plan for students to reclaim credits for graduation. The state also mandated teachers to take graduate-level training that had to be completed outside of the workday, with strict deadlines and no incentive pay. SP1 explained, “The increased workload on teachers resulting from new initiatives and other changes designed to increase student achievement has taken a huge toll on teachers, resulting in major challenges in retaining teachers.” SP1 continued, “Teachers work hard to become proficient in new methods, and when they have success, things change.”

### *Parental and Family Communication and Support*

In addition to the pressures of the workload, teachers face the strain of the lack of parental and family support. SP6 exclaims that teachers in the rural SSD experience parents and families who consistently lack support and apathy for their child’s behavior and academic success. SP6 states that,

> Parenting has changed over the years. Parents often do not accept responsibility for their role in the education process. This lack of accountability is due to a lack of parenting skills. Parents do not understand educational changes, nor are they equipped to help their children succeed. When parents do not understand, they cannot help. As a result, schools must spend more time equipping parents to help their children in more ways than in the past.

Teachers are responsible for contacting parents daily via an app called DOJO to ensure consistent communication for student updates. These updates consist of academic and behavioral updates for parents. In addition, as directed at the district and local school levels, teachers must contact parents if there is a decline in grades, attendance, and behavior. Although teachers are required to build relationships to foster communication with students' families, it is the consensus at the rural SSD that the deficiencies students are experiencing post-pandemic are equal to the decline in parental support and concern. Teachers are experiencing an added layer of responsibility and shouldering the parental responsibilities of families, exhausting the work, leading to teacher burnout and teachers leaving the profession in the rural SSD. SP6 explains,

> This additional responsibility to teach parents places a burden on the school as a whole, especially teachers. I truly believe parents want to help their children because they love them but get frustrated when they do not understand and are unable to help. All of this strain leads to increased pressure on teachers and, in many cases, can drive teachers from the profession. Having to do more, with constant change, leads teachers to feel overworked and under more pressure. The

changes through COVID exacerbated this problem as we had to change how we taught and did business, which added to the stress.

According to the principals interviewed, there will always be a demanding workload for teachers; however, principals can help alleviate some pressure by balancing out the responsibilities throughout the staff. Principals can provide duty-free lunch periods for teachers to work on state and district initiative projects. Create duty rosters that are equitable among staff and provide new teacher support. Managing the school environment by distributing responsibilities equitably among the staff, providing opportunities for teachers to complete tasks during work hours, and supporting teacher-parent relationships may help to retain teachers in the rural SSD. In summation, SP7 explained, “Staying focused on student achievement and taking away responsibilities that are not important to meeting school goals and student needs is a key component in the challenge to keep teachers.”

**Theme 2: Challenges of Rurality**

The rural SSD faces challenges in retaining teachers due to its geographical location, which is far from housing and attractions, long commutes, and lack of resources. The rural area does not offer many recreational activities after school hours or on the weekends, leading to teachers feeling isolated. SP5 commented, “Challenges include finding teachers willing to give up the conveniences of the city to relocate to a place with limited shopping, dining, and attractions.” The rural SSD also has limited housing for teachers new to the community, creating long commutes. SP5 continues, “For young teachers, there is no nightlife for them in this district and no apartments outside

public housing projects.” Additionally, the rural SSD faces the challenge of a lack of resources, being one of the two poorest districts in the state (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019 & U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

### *Housing and Community Connection*

The rural SSD most often hires first-year or new-to-the-area or state teachers due to a lack of local candidates due to the community's rurality. In turn, teachers new to the community often have long commute times averaging upward of an hour and beyond, which adds to their exhaustion. Teachers also have a tough transition and difficulty building relationships that help them connect to families and the community. The challenge of finding housing and if housing is secured, the lack of social opportunities and community recreation is limited, resulting in a lack of community connection. This often causes teachers to begin their careers in the rural SSD and seek opportunities in other districts once they have gained the needed experience.

SP8 explained, “We were constantly training teachers and had little stability within the building because the rural SSD was a stepping stone to “greener pastures.” SP5 shares the same perspective and states. “Our district is simply a training ground for the larger neighboring districts.”

### *Family Support and Lack of Resources*

The struggle to make family and community connections and the rural SSD being a high-poverty district with few to no resources presented another layer of challenges in retaining teachers. According to the principal's perspective, community support parallels the challenges of retaining teachers in the rural SSD. SP3 discussed,

> There is little to no community support for teachers, and many parents blame the teachers for the failures or shortcomings of students. Administrators fear backlash from the community and often cave to parental pressure. Teachers are villainized whenever they discipline children. No one wants to come to the profession without support.

SP5 continues to elaborate, "There is a disparity between the small group of haves and the larger group of have-nots in this district, which prevents the district from keeping teachers due to the high needs of students and lack of parent support." The overall challenges of the teaching profession have an ever-present and continual effect on teachers; therefore, leaving the district for a district that has resources to support teaching, students, and families alleviates a significant burden on teachers.

**Theme 3: Competitive Pay and External Factors**

***Retention Bonuses and Salary Supplements***

The rural SSD faces the challenge of resources, resulting in the ability to pay teachers a competitive wage. Historically, after this school year, the rural SSD has been one of the lowest-paying districts in the southeastern states. It does not pay retention bonuses or provide a salary supplement. SP7 further expounds, "Being in a rural, low-wealth district, there has always been the issue of not having local supplements and retention bonuses.

Post COVID-19 the school district was granted ESSER funds to support district and student academic needs to bridge the gap from the effects of COVID-19. In the prior and current school years, the district was able to, as a one-time bonus, provide a retention

bonus and a ten percent salary supplement which provided a competitive edge to retain teachers for these last two school years. SP5 explained,

> The district is currently utilizing funds from the federal government to provide teachers with sign-on bonuses and funds from the state to increase the supplement to make the district competitive with other neighboring counties. However, once the money runs out, we will be struggling even more to find and keep teachers.

Historically, the rural SSD has not been able to do this due to a lack of ESSER resources, and once the resources are depleted, the challenge for retention greatly increases due to no retention bonuses and low salaries. SP4 shares the concerns, “Many times, teachers would teach here and then move on to districts that paid more in local supplements. Our students suffer because of constantly having new and inexperienced teachers.” With concerns about the upcoming school year's challenges, the principals share the consensus of retaining teachers. SP4 shared the concern,

> We will again face the increased challenges of losing teachers to neighboring districts with sign-on bonuses of ten to thirty thousand dollars. We also have the challenge of a bordering state with many resources and high-paying school districts to compete with in trying to retain and recruit teachers.

### *External Factors Affecting Retention*

The challenge of retaining teachers is an overall concern for the principals in the upcoming years. The principals expressed the typical reasons teachers leave the profession they must navigate from year to year. They commonly expressed factors such as teachers not returning from maternity leave, divorce, relocating due to family

obligations, employment outside of education, long commutes, and job dissatisfaction as continual challenges. SP2 speaks about reasons teachers leave by saying, “I may not know all the reasons all the time because of a lack of trust, and sometimes I do know, and sometimes those reasons are for uncontrollable things like leaving to take care of sick parents or divorces. SP7 surmises, “Pay in many districts is poor, and teachers are wooed into other professions when they cannot afford to stay in K-12.”

The current major concern for principals is the added burden of the future, with no retention bonuses and no local supplement for the future retention of teachers. SP1 explains, “We lost a few to opportunities in and out of education. A few of my teachers transferred to schools closer to their homes.” SP8 reiterated the concern, “Teachers feel they can get better support, better kids, better teaching assignments, and better pay elsewhere. SP4 simply stated, “Teachers leave because they are unhappy, and we cannot keep teachers who do not want to stay. The conversation continued throughout the principals’ interviews. SP1 explained,

> There is no magic formula. Sometimes, there are external factors, such as the overall climate of education, which is kind of what we are dealing with here again. State and district mandates are burdening teachers, and teacher burnout may influence a teacher's decision to leave. Nevertheless, again, the practices, as I said before, are being supportive, listening, appreciative, available, and open.

A resounding commonality shared by the principals is summed up with the words from SP5, who states, “Ask a teacher why he or she wants to leave and do not hold it against that teacher.” As learned from the principals in the rural SSD, being supportive, listening,

appreciative, available, and open to hearing from teachers provides valuable information to combat the challenges of retaining teachers.

**Theme 4: Professional Development**

Professional development relates to the success and challenges of retaining teachers at the district and local school levels. It is a space where principals gain professional insight, collaborate with other principals, and learn from shared experiences. Overall, principals shared that there is a lack of professional development provided by the district or the state in efforts to retain teachers. SP8 explained, “We are severely lacking in this department. Professional development must have a purpose and meet the needs of the staff.” All principals agreed that professional development is needed to understand how to retain teachers in the current educational climate. The principals rely on each other for support, resources, and advice in retaining teachers. SP2 ascertains,

> The district has provided little formal support in retaining teachers. Many of my experiences in improving retention came from collaboration with other school administrators in the district with whom I had a good rapport. In many cases, I collaborated with colleagues outside the district to see what they were doing to retain their teachers and gleaned from them.

In the principal conversations, it was collectively explained that teacher retention is not always the sole responsibility of the local school. Principals expressed that they need district support in strategies to effectively meet the challenges of retaining their teachers. The challenges they face are both out of the principal's control and in the principal’s control. The collective perceptions were that principals could not control

district-level decisions like salary or bonuses but would welcome professional development on retaining teachers at the local school level. SP1 elaborated on the need for professional development by stating,

> Our district is very much lacking in initiatives, professional development for principals, or anything related to retaining teachers. I feel like this is fully the principal's responsibility from the district's perspective. Our principals need support in this because we cannot always mitigate all the factors of teachers leaving. It is not always a school-based problem. However, we acknowledge we do have some control at our school and would welcome PD that would help at the local level to retain teachers.

**Theme 5: School Culture and Community**

***Shared Vision***

The principals share the belief that supporting the district's vision and mission unites all of the school's efforts to serve students and the community. The heart of the shared vision is at the district level, and then, through leadership, promoting that shared vision in integrating the individual schools' identities. SP2 stated, “I work very hard to support and communicate the district's vision, mission, and motto with my staff and student body.”

All eight principals agreed that school culture and community are crucial to successfully retaining teachers. They all shared that they rely on each other to share strategies with one another to implement at the local level in the efforts to retain teachers. SP1 explained, “We cannot control what happens at the district level, but we can, as

leaders, build a shared vision in our schools to promote and maintain a positive school culture that builds on a sense of community within our schools." The principals conveyed that there is a sense of community prevalent throughout the rural SSD at the school level. They further exclaimed that building and sustaining relationships strengthened the school culture and supported the retention of teachers. SP4 stated, "Many of the teachers in my school recruited their friends from other districts because they love the positive culture of our rural school. Teachers are a school's best marketers, which helps to recruit and retain teachers."

The principals collectively described the strength of creating a shared vision as based upon the building and sustaining of positive relationships at the school level. Cultivating a positive school culture and community is founded on integrity, trust, and a focus on students' success, creating a culture of family. SP4 states,

> Really, quite frankly, the most important thing is that we foster a school culture shared community of trust and value and, ultimately, a safe learning environment. School culture and a family atmosphere are keys. For my leadership in retaining my teachers, my priority and my leadership team is cultivating a work environment that is welcoming, happy, safe, and conducive to our student's learning.

In summation, SP8 expresses, "People, in my experience, if they have an environment like this one, with close connections to colleagues, they typically do not leave even if there are opportunities outside the school division for salary advancement or career advancement.

***Developing Relationships***

Developing relationships with staff is a delicate process requiring the principals' time, patience, and openness. SP4 exclaimed, “There is lots of time in lots of conversations and open dialogues. Knowing the staff and their unique needs is necessary to build relationships that cultivate a positive school culture.” The principals all expressed that genuine transparency, honesty, and trust are fundamental to relationship development. All concurred that meeting teachers where they are and building from that perspective helps to meet needs and differentiate as needed for each staff member individually. SP1 stated, “Providing appropriate emotional support as needed and making teachers feel valued.”

Furthermore, communication and individualized support were hallmarks of the principal's perceptions in building relationships to encourage teacher retention. SP3 spoke specifically to these ideas, "You have to be honest and genuine with teachers. Have high expectations but be able to be flexible and provide differentiated support to teachers based on their individual needs.” SP8 describes the efforts in building lasting relationships with staff, saying,

> I intentionally got to know my teachers and built relationships with them. I had to get them to trust me before we could grow as a school. Learning about them, their values and beliefs, and their families has helped me communicate with them effectively and build a positive rapport with them.

Cultivating relationships with teachers is imperative in the efforts to retain teachers. According to the collective perceptions of the principals, although unexpected factors

from life occurrences happen that cannot be controlled and teachers leave, positive relationships can sometimes mitigate the decision-making process and cause teachers to stay. SP4 provides positive advice by stating,

> Principals must be supportive, open, and communicative. Transparency and honesty are crucial in all relationships. Creating a culture of trust helps to create a culture of success. All will be well if these ingredients are experienced, not just stated, throughout the building.

### *Moral Incentives*

Moral boosters and incentives serve as motivators and encouragement in the school environment. These aspects unite the staff to promote a positive family school culture where teachers have buy-in and ownership. Moral boosters in the school environment translate into celebratory events, school spirit days, and recognitions of achievements. SP1 describes moral incentives, "What we do here at my school, we celebrate our folks. We do it in many ways, whether just a small token of appreciation by bringing a breakfast treat, Potlucks, or seasonal celebrations.” SP2 furthers the conversation, **“**Celebrating teachers, spirit ware jean Friday, monthly potlucks, celebrating accomplishments, and posting them on the bulletin boards. These components have the power to positively change the school's culture.”

### *Teacher Support*

Providing teacher support in instruction, curriculum, and behavior is important to meet individual and student needs. New teacher support and veteran teacher support are critical in retaining teachers. New and veteran teachers come with areas of expertise,

sometimes similar and often different due to experience. SP8 discussed novice and veteran teachers,

> Let us discuss novice teachers first who do not have any teaching experience. They are provided with a teacher mentor through a division-based program. Other new teachers without any experience are provided at the school level with a mentor in the building. My veteran teachers are not provided with any specific system of support. But they all know that they have support from me as their principal for assistance, guidance, and anything they would need.

Successfully utilizing veteran teachers and their expertise in the school environment can promote the opportunity for support to new teachers, curriculum support, and general expertise to aid in developing organizational management as appropriate. SP3 states, “I was intentional to listen to successful veteran teachers and rely on their expertise.” SP8 shared strategies to support teachers,

> Open, consistent, encouraging, and appropriate two-way communication with teachers. Listen to them and provide support based on their needs. Veteran teachers need support differently from novice teachers, so support has to be individualized and differentiated. Because of stress, teachers need to feel supported and valued. I had to be international to do all these things, which were time-consuming and behind the scenes.

SP3 follows up with strategies and suggestions for supporting teachers in an effort to create positive relationships and retain teachers,

> Honesty, integrity, and relationship building are what I practiced as a teacher, and they carried over to my leadership style. I take off their plates as much as possible and create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, where teachers feel valued and trusted. You control what you can, such as your response to their needs and the differentiated support provided.

**Theme 6: Principal Support and Leadership**

According to eighty percent of the principals, administrative support and leadership challenges exist throughout the rural district. SP1 stated, “As a principal serving in this district, we did not receive guidance on several school concerns. We made it up as we went along. We all do this.” In a similar viewpoint, SP3 agreed, “In this rural district, there were many opportunities to help school principals, but to no avail, and leading a school is not a one-size-fits-all operation.”

Administrative support typically refers to the district office, where the superintendent and the directors are placed, and where support for principals would be found. SP2 and SP8 specifically mentioned that district leadership is extremely inconsistent, forcing school-based principals to lead without support and relying on their expertise.SP2 and SP8 explained, “There was never a strategic plan presented and discussed for the school-based leadership team in the district.”

Principals in the rural SSD have expressed their leadership and support strategies for retaining teachers in their respective buildings. The principals shared behaviors and strategies such as servant leadership, open door policy, availability and being present,

listening before speaking, collective decision making, and the reflections of value and appreciation at the core. SP2 shared these strategies,

> My staff knows I listen to them and fought hard to get the supplies and structure they wanted. I am also honest with them if something is unattainable. If I hear a rumor, I ask about it. Teachers know I have an open door. I wrote grants to get supplies and technology. I never ask teachers to do anything I would not do myself. I cover classes. I team teach with any teacher who desires it. I am visible and know every staff member by name. It definitely makes a difference.

SP1 shared similar strategies,

> Principal behaviors that teachers really appreciate will influence their decision to leave or stay, such as having an open-door policy and being available and present within the school building. It has to be supportive. It has to be intentionally supported to individual needs. There has to be lots and lots of listening before even talking. And they need to know that they are appreciated, valued, and wanted.

The eight principals' overall perception is to lead from the attributes of a servant, projecting appreciation and value. These are the successful fundamental aspects of retaining teachers from the principals' perceptions. SP6 surmised the context of support and leadership conducive to retaining teachers, “I believe 1000% that my relational servant leadership style has been instrumental in retaining my staff. Teachers, knowing you share an equal load and are in the trenches with them, build connections, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities.”

### *Organizational Management Strategies*

The principals shared organizational strategies that support teacher retention. They explained that implementing organizational management strategies such as protecting planning time, accessing resources, and analyzing student and teacher data is instrumental in retaining teachers. In addition, they recommended allowing teachers autonomy in their classrooms, keeping teachers teaching in areas they are comfortable in, never having them implement curriculum and/or programs they are not comfortable with without proper training, and managing teacher workloads. SP3 stated,

> I am constantly looking for many ways to take things off their plates when new initiatives are implemented. I stayed focused on student achievement and removed responsibilities that were not important to meeting school goals and student achievement. I also had to intentionally look for the appropriate resources to help teachers succeed. In addition, I relied on my teachers for input in the ways they taught and gave them the flexibility to teach to their strengths as long as they used appropriate strategies and positively engaged their students.

SP4 adamantly stated. “Do not force them to implement things they know they will not be successful with nor give them classes they are uncomfortable teaching. Degrees do not equate to comfort or the ability to teach something. Ask them what support they need and give it to them.”

Analyzing student and teacher data to support teachers is also instrumental in providing concrete, real-time, immediate feedback for guidance and direction. Analyzing student data will support the teacher instructionally by providing the appropriate tiered

support for their student's academic achievement. Analyzing teachers' student standardized testing scores will help in targeting the areas of student deficiencies so that the teacher can remediate them appropriately to ensure student mastery. All principals, as it is a district mandate, hold weekly grade level or content area Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings to collect, document, track, and analyze student mastery data. In addition, to formal data support, three out of the eight principals used informal observational data to support teacher needs as appropriate. This information was derived from walkthrough data, and informal 20-minute announced observation data. SP7 explains the benefits of data analysis, "Looking at teacher data is paramount as well because the data also shows areas of needed support that the teachers may or may not be aware of and adjusting the support based on data as well." SP3 explains the purpose of PLC meetings and the informal observation data process,

> Weekly PLC meetings are where we look at student data and provide appropriate support. I also have individual meetings with teachers, where I use informal observation data to guide my discussions with them and provide support. Individual meetings are informal, and most of the time, I just have conversations with teachers for coaching and support.

Lastly, the principals suggested strategies that may provide immediate positive outcomes to support teachers. One strategy is to create relevant professional development where teachers facilitate the building of a community atmosphere. This creates teacher buy-in and ownership of their work environment. A second strategy is to have grade-level and content-area team-building activities throughout the year. This provides

collaboration, promotes communication, and creates an atmosphere of support among teachers by relying on the expertise of the team. Finally, a few strategies from the principals are implemented across grade levels to support teachers and promote retention. These strategies can be seen throughout the building: maintain appropriate class sizes, keep the number of classes taught according to the regularly scheduled day, keep the course taught consistent with the teacher's content area expertise and grade level, and provide opportunities to contribute to decision-making when appropriate. These strategies are meant to provide immediate positive outcomes that may, in the long term, help to retain teachers.

**Figure 2**

*Overall Research Themes by Questions*

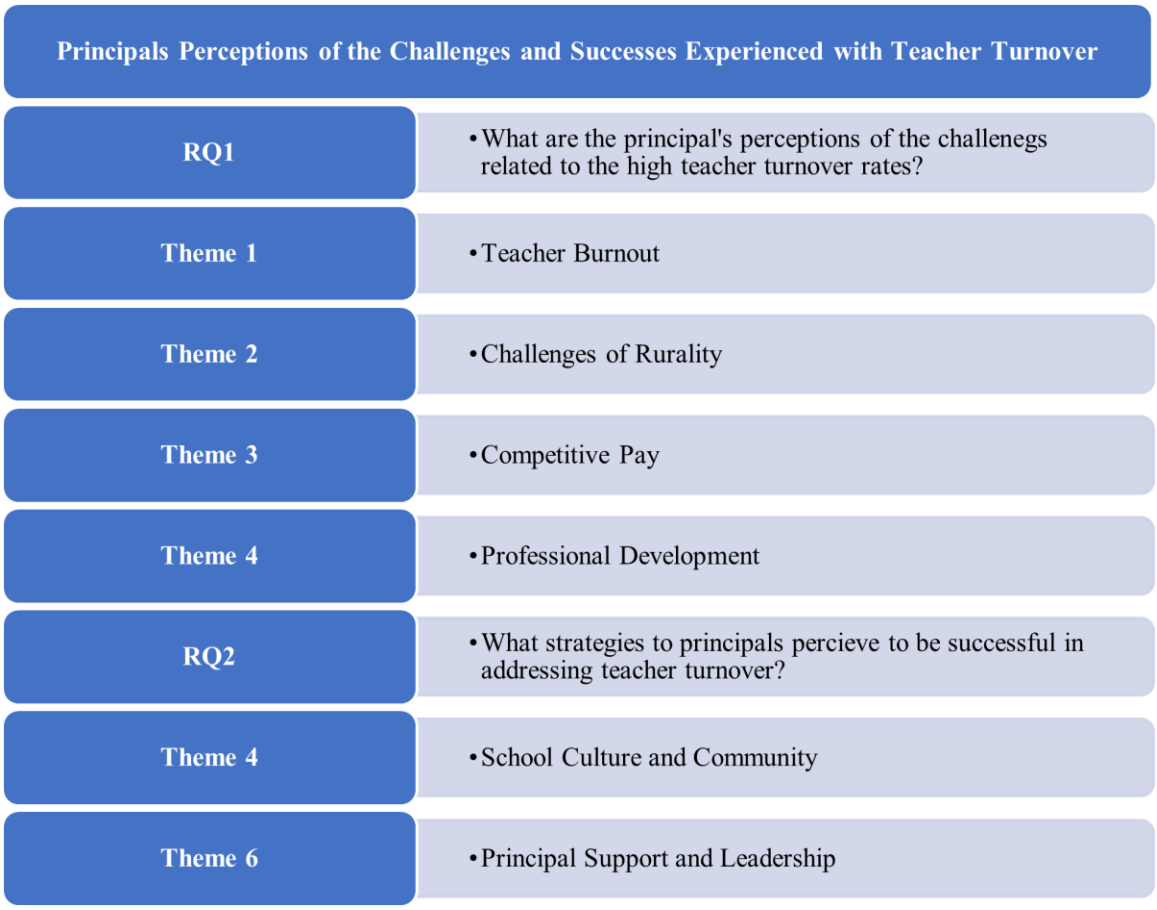
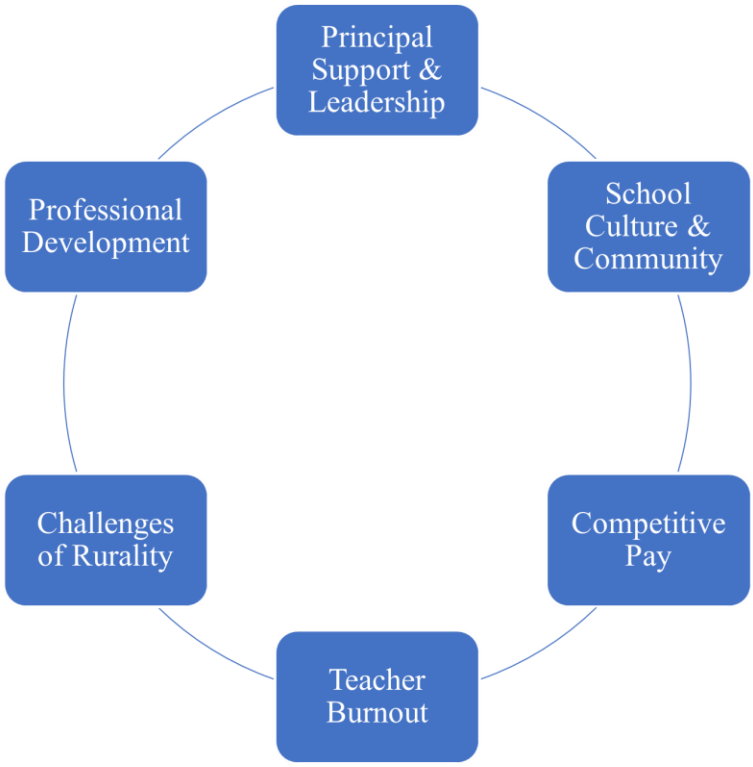



**Figure 3**

*Overall Themes*




K-12 principals collectively believe principal leadership is integral to school operations' structure and organizational management. All principals expressed mutually that principal leadership is directly connected to building individual relationships that support and affect positive school culture and the overall community of the school environment. The challenges that resonated collectively with the principals in retaining teachers were the lack of lack of district support in efforts to retain teachers, rurality and geographical location coupled with low salary and lack of supplements. With support from the district providing mentors and professional development for teachers along with strong relationships at the school level, supporting a positive school culture that develops

a genuine communal community will encourage the retention of teachers in the wake of the challenges of low salary and rurality.

## Summary

Teacher turnover is a continuing challenge for the rural Southeastern school district principals. This basic qualitative study sought to explore the perceptions of K-12 principals concerning teacher turnover. Eight principals participated in the study, sharing their perceptions of the challenges and successes they have experienced with teacher turnover in a rural southeastern school district. The principal's perspectives will be used to support the district's principals within the rural districts in efforts to reduce teacher turnover. In each interview, the K-12 principals identified and discussed the challenges and successes they experienced with retaining teachers. The principals identified teacher burnout, challenges of rurality, competitive pay, professional development, school culture and community, and principal support and leadership as elements contributing to teacher turnover.

The principals all conveyed their concerns over how to combat the challenge of teacher turnover experienced year to year. From these concerns developed factors that are out of the principal's control: low salary and no supplement, limited housing and attractions, long commutes, and life-changing events that affect teacher retention. In contrast, there was a collective consensus among the principals that the prior year and current school year salary increase, and supplement pay have been instrumental in retaining teachers, but the district stands to face the critical challenge of losing teachers with the loss of the salary increase and supplement for the future years.

All principals expressed that support with professional development on teacher turnover would be beneficial to them in efforts to retain teachers. In contrast, the principals shared that they communicate and collaborate with one another to implement support strategies at the local level to retain their teachers. Principals provided successful strategies such as building a shared vision, building, and fostering relationships, teacher support, and moral incentives in efforts to retain teachers. The principals work to influence and implement the success strategies at the building level to protect teachers' planning time, reduce the workload to only what dictates meeting the needs of students, build a positive school culture, and provide principal support. All principals expressed the importance of the implementation of these factors and how they are essential success strategies for retaining teachers in a rural, low-wealth southeastern school district.

During the data analysis phase, there were no discrepant cases to report that discredited the current themes. Although discrepant cases are an important research element that defines the finding that will challenge the study's conclusion, no discrepant cases were found in this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Chapter 5 will review the purpose and nature of the study and then connect the conceptual framework with the results to gain meaningful knowledge that may advance the study of teacher turnover. The chapter will conclude with an interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and finally, the impact on social change.

# Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the teacher turnover rates in a Southeastern School District that are consistently higher than teacher turnover rates in other state schools and the nation. The study invited eight K-12 school principals to participate in this research study providing their lived experiences in the efforts to understand teacher retention in the rural southeastern school district. The research study centered around two research questions that guided this study. A semistructured interview protocol was accompanied by twelve research questions to obtain principals' perceptions of the factors attributing to the consistently high teacher turnover rates in the rural SSD. The study's results revealed six collective themes from the principal's perceptions. The themes derived from the study's findings were *teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay, professional development, school culture and community, principal support, and leadership,* which are elements that contribute to teacher turnover. The key findings may provide strategies K-12 principals may utilize at the school level to aid in the retention of teachers.

## Findings

The results of this study unveiled successful strategies that principals are implementing at the school level that assist in the challenge of retaining teachers. Principals described strategies such as building trusting relationships, reducing the workload, celebrating accomplishments, creating a positive school culture and sense of community, and providing individualized support aided in the retention of teachers.

These key findings may support K-12 principals in the rural SSD in their efforts to retain their teachers.

The principals specified challenges related to retaining teachers, such as teacher burnout and excessive workload, limited housing and community connections in rural areas, competitive pay, and life changing events. These challenges have multiple layers that are not in the control of the building-level principals.

## Interpretation of the Findings

Coding, journal and observation notes, theme identification, categorizing, and data analysis aided in drawing conclusions from the collected data. The analysis of the findings from this basic qualitative study provided contributions validating the K-12 principals' perceptions of the challenges they face year-to-year with retaining teachers in the rural SSD.

Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover was the conceptual framework for this basic qualitative research study (Lee et al., 1996). Lee and Mitchell's five pathways to employee turnover are a framework in the field of organizational psychology to understand the various factors that contribute to employees leaving their jobs (Lee et al., 1996 & Hom et al., 2017). The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover identifies five decision pathways that explain why employees leave their positions to understand an individual's motivation to leave their job. More specifically, the model examines employee turnover by identifying the psychological or decision-making processes involved in the decision to leave a job (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006 & Hom et al., 2017). The benefit of the model is that it

provides the ability to identify the types of events that cause employees to begin the turnover process and eventually leave their positions (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006). Principals equipped with this decision-making process information can better anticipate, manage, and mitigate possible turnover situations by identifying turnover behavior and hopefully retaining a teacher who may have been planning to leave (Donnelly & Quirin, 2006). Moreover, the model provides insight to employers to understand the employee's reason for leaving to make structural changes, retention strategies, or incentives to retain employees. Specifically, Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover purposed to create a model that was a more comprehensive realistic representation to explore and target specific individual decisions as to why people choose to leave their professions.

The unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover theory suggests that employees follow one of the cognitive pathways when deciding to leave their positions (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Lee and Mitchell (1994) referred to the cognitive pathways as how employees interpret their work environment, identify options, and enact responses. The theory of the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover aided in understanding why teachers leave the profession based upon the theory concepts of five distinctive decision pathways that individually focus on the constructs of psychological and cognitive processes and external events (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). These five cognitive decision pathways include (a) personal, positive, or expected/unexpected life events; (b) negative organizational events; (c) unexpected job offers; (d) job satisfaction; and (e) image violation (Lee et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994,).

Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover validated this study through the literature review. It additionally assisted with the exploration of the repeated patterns in employees' decisions to leave their jobs and examined the continuous additions of reasons why employees leave their jobs, resulting in a broader understanding of what induces employees to quit their jobs (Lee et al., 1996). Through the interviews, the K-12 principals presented factors based on their lived experiences that contributed to teacher turnover in rural SSD. The principals presented these factors: burnout and excessive workload, limited housing and community connections in the rural area, competitive pay, and life-changing events. Teacher burnout is a result of an increased workload and lack of parent and family support for students. Challenges of the rural area are centered around limited housing and attractions, long commutes, and community connections. Competitive pay and external life-changing events consist of low salaries, no bonuses, and supplements, divorce, family obligations forcing a move, job offers, and job dissatisfaction. Finally, the work environment and lack of professional development all contribute to the challenges of retaining teachers. According to the literature, low pay, challenging school environments, and weak professional development support and recognition contributed to teacher turnover (Garcia et al., & the Economic Policy Institute, 2019). Principals in rural areas face the challenges of retaining and recruiting teachers due to high-poverty areas, low pay, limited resources, and geographic isolation (Azano & Stewart, 2016).

Applying the components of Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover and paralleling them with the challenges of retaining

teachers will aid in understanding why teachers are leaving the profession. Based on the unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover, teachers leave the profession due to unexpected life events, negative organizational causes, job offers, job satisfaction, and image violation (Lee et al., 2017; Lee & Mitchell, 1994,). Understanding the challenges principals face with retaining teachers and why teachers leave will help strategize how to keep them and what things are in the control of the principals to implement at the school level to retain teachers. Understanding teachers' decisions to leave the profession will allow school districts to design effective intervention plans and higher level learning conditions to combat the root causes of why teachers leave the profession (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) retaining teachers requires an all-inclusive approach that ensures teachers are prepared for challenges, fairly compensated, provided meaningful professional development training, and a supported collaborative learning environment promoting effectiveness and growth. Although other factors can predict teacher retention, the only significant predictor of retention is strong principal leadership and support (Player et al., 2017).

The pathways to employee turnover were applied to the key findings to identify the decision making process and motivations principals need to look for according to why teachers leave to manage the situation before teachers make a concrete decision to leave the position. The decision pathways applied to the key finding of why teachers leave their positions, or the profession are as follows.

Pathway 1 is a *personal, positive, or expected/unexpected life event* when a shock activates a preexisting plan to leave a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al.,

1996). For teachers, shocks could include sudden leadership changes, budget cuts leading to layoffs, school closures, or unexpected changes in school policies. This also includes personal expected or unexpected life events such as a divorce, sick parent, family crisis resulting in sudden relocation, etc. These shocks may disrupt teachers' sense of stability, and job security, leading or forcing them to seek employment elsewhere.

Pathway 2 *negative organizational event* happens when shock prompts an employee to quit immediately due to an abhorrent workplace event (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This refers to employees who stay in their current jobs despite experiencing dissatisfaction or a desire to leave. However, over time, the accumulation of dissatisfaction may become untenable, eventually leading them to decide to leave. For teachers, continuation may occur when they feel a sense of obligation to their students or colleagues, but persistent job dissatisfaction eventually outweighs these factors, prompting them to leave.

Pathway 3 is an *unexpected job offer* that causes employees to question their current commitment to their jobs (Lee et al., 1996; Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008). When teachers perceive that their professional image or expectations are not being respected or upheld within the organization, their commitment to that organization may weaken. They may feel less connected to the school's mission and goals, leading to decreased organizational commitment and an increased likelihood of turnover.

Pathway 4 is *job satisfaction,* an employee's dissatisfaction that induces one to leave or quit a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This pathway involves a gradual decline in job satisfaction and commitment over time, eventually

leading to turnover. For teachers, this may occur when they experience persistent challenges in their work environment, such as ineffective leadership, lack of support, or unmanageable workloads. Over time, these challenges erode teachers' morale and motivation, ultimately prompting them to leave for a more supportive or fulfilling work environment.

Pathway 5 is *image violation* which refers to when an employee perceives that their image or self concept is being violated or compromised within the organization (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This may translate to teachers not agreeing or believing in the direction of the district or principal. Teachers develop a professional identity that encompasses their beliefs, values, and behaviors aligned with their role. When they perceive that their professional image or expectations are violated, it can lead to feelings of disillusionment, disengagement, and ultimately, a desire to leave their current position. This results from continued unfulfilled promises resulting in loss of trust and commitment to the district or school due to lack of perceived respect, constant change in expectations, and increased workload, causing emotional and physical exhaustion, creating frustration and disappointment, and leading to teacher burnout.

**Key finding 1.** The data indicated that principals perceive teacher burnout as one of the main factors causing teachers to leave their positions in the rural SSD. The results of this study concluded that 100% of the principals agree that teachers are required to complete more work and responsibilities. This oftentimes causes teacher burnout that results in teachers leaving the profession. Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover decision pathway 5 is image violation which refers to when

an employee perceives that their image or self-concept is being violated or compromised within the organization (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This results in a loss of trust and commitment to the district or school due to a lack of perceived respect from the constant change in expectations and increased workload, causing emotional and physical exhaustion, creating frustration and disappointment, and leading to teacher burnout. According to the principals interviewed, there will always be a demanding workload for teachers; however, principals can help alleviate some pressure by balancing out the responsibilities throughout the staff and removing responsibilities that do not pertain to student achievement, which may support teacher turnover in their schools.

**Key finding 2.** Principals perceived that the challenges of being in a rural area were specific to lack of housing, community relationships, and low salaries, affecting the ability to retain teachers. Teachers have difficulty finding housing in rural areas due to limited housing opportunities and apartment rentals. In contrast, rural areas do not offer many attractions or opportunities for socialization, leading to difficulty in making community relationships and connections. Rural areas also have challenges of low salaries, no retention bonuses, and no supplement pay for teachers. Principals agree that the high turnover from these factors causes a constant trend of training teachers, leading to instability in the school. Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover decision pathway 3 *unexpected job offer*s may come when teachers face the challenges of the rural area. This pathway is when teachers question their commitment to their job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). The

challenges of rural areas, such as long commutes, lack of housing and attractions, and difficulty making community connections, are all daily challenges for teachers and out of the principal's control. This pathway offers principals the psychological components of the motivation to make quick decisions for an unexpected job offer. Principals can capitalize on teachers feeling respected, committed, and connected to the school to ensure teachers' buy-in and desire to stay and not take an unexpected job offer.

**Key finding 3.** Principals commonly expressed factors such as teachers not returning from maternity leave, divorce, relocating due to family obligations, employment outside of education, long commutes, and job dissatisfaction as continual challenges in retaining teachers. Lee and Mitchell's unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover decision pathway 1 *personal, positive, or expected/unexpected life event* is when a shock activates a preexisting plan to leave a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). An example of this pathway is if an employee has a plan, but an unexpected event forces an immediate decision to quit. Though principals cannot control life events and sudden choices, principals can manage situations such as policy changes, leadership changes, and district demands by communicating and providing support in efforts to keep teachers during expected or unexpected sudden changes and challenges. This pathway provides principals with the knowledge of what sudden changes and decisions may be. It gives insight into those things that can be managed by communication and support in efforts to retain teachers to decrease turnover.

**Key finding 4.** The principals conveyed that organizational factors have contributed to the teacher turnover rates in the rural SSD. The concern from the

principals is that there is a lack of district support for principals and that leading a school is not a “one-size-fits-all” situation leaving a need for support from the district level. Principals stated that district support is inconsistent at best and that they are left to rely on their individual expertise. Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover pathway 2 negative organizational event happens when shock prompts an employee to quit immediately due to an abhorrent workplace event (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This occurs when teachers feel continually unsupported but stay out of obligation. Typically, a final event or persistent job dissatisfaction outweighs their desire to stay, and they choose to leave. Principals can use pathway 2 to constantly monitor teachers' satisfaction and their building support strategies in the workplace to mitigate turnover in their school.

**Key finding 5.** The principals all agreed that relationships and school culture are contributing factors in retaining teachers. They further exclaimed that building and sustaining relationships strengthened the school culture and supported the retention of teachers. The principals collectively described the strength of creating a shared vision as based upon the building and sustaining of positive relationships at the school level. Cultivating a positive school culture and community is founded on integrity, trust, and a focus on students' success, creating a family culture. According to the collective perceptions of the principals, although unexpected factors from life occurrences happen that cannot be controlled and teachers leave, positive relationships can sometimes mitigate the decision-making process and cause teachers to stay. Lee and Mitchell’s unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover decision pathway 4 *job satisfaction* is

an employee's dissatisfaction that induces one to leave or quit a job (Lee et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2008; Lee et al., 1996). This pathway can be used to assess teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to the school community. Pathway 4 presents teachers' motivation for leaving a position that correlates with school culture and community where principals can continue to monitor teacher morale and motivation, the work environment, and their level of support according to this pathway.

In summary, Lee and Mitchell's (1994) model suggests that a combination of job-related factors, organizational factors, and personal considerations influences teacher turnover. Addressing these factors through supportive leadership, professional development opportunities, fair compensation, and a positive work environment can help reduce turnover and retain talented educators.

**Table 7**

*Themes Alignment with Research and Conceptual Framework*

| Research Questions | Sub Questions | Themes | Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover Theory |
|---|---|---|---|
| RQ1: What are the principal's perceptions of the challenges related to the high teacher turnover rates? | • What challenges have you faced in pursuing to retain your teachers? | • State and District Initiatives and Mandates | • Personal Positive or Expected/Unexpected Life Event |
| | • Explain how you challenge your leadership team in retaining teachers. | • Guidance and Support<br>• Principal Leadership | • Negative Organizational Event |
| RQ2: What strategies do principals perceive to be successful in addressing teacher turnover? | • Which leadership strategies have you used to build a shared vision and encourage a sense of community within your school that aided in retaining teachers? | • Trust and Value<br>• Support<br>• Celebrate Achievements | • Unexpected Job Offer<br>• Job Satisfaction |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | • Are there practices you have found and implemented in your experience that are crucial to retaining teachers? | • Supportive<br>• Listening<br>• Available and Present | • Image Violation |

## Limitations of the Study

There were three limitations to this basic qualitative study. One limitation was that the study consisted of a limited number of participants, consisting of eight K-12 principals supervising schools in the rural southeastern school district risking possible bias. The second limitation is that I work as one of the principals in the district but was not included among the eight participants, nor did I influence their perceptions as I do not supervise any of the participants. The third limitation was the risk of bias, which any qualitative study presents that possibility due to the researcher being present. I employed dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability to ensure trustworthiness to mitigate bias.

## Recommendations

This basic qualitative study explored K-12 principals' perceptions of the successes and challenges of retaining teachers in a rural southeastern school district. Recommendations derived from this study are that K-12 principals study Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover and compare the five pathways to the reasons they state teachers are leaving the profession to understand further and develop strategies to mitigate the crisis of teacher turnover in their district. According to the K-12 principals, positive school culture and building relationships are

paramount to retaining teachers from year to year. The principal's leadership approach affects the school culture and climate, teachers' attitudes toward teaching and students, interpersonal staff relationships and morals, and student achievement (Wood et al., 2018).

The second recommendation is that principals continue to study and research strategies and methods that build positive school culture and make connections between the culture of the community to build the school culture and climate. Positive, influential principal leadership may promote a collaborative working environment that fosters a positive school culture and climate for the school's and students' overall success (Kempa et al., 2017).

The third recommendation is for the principals to collaborate, research, and explore the benefits of working in a rural school community and capitalize on those findings by developing recruitment practices and highlighting these benefits continually in the work environment in an effort to retain their teachers. Principals who have developed positive practices to support teachers result in teachers remaining committed to the mission, vision, and student achievement goals (Furner & McCulla, 2017).

## Implications

This basic qualitative research study may lead to positive social change by providing insight into the challenges and successes of teacher turnover in the rural southeastern school district. Understanding teacher turnover in the rural SSD may lead to retaining teachers which will promote positive student outcomes. Teacher turnover rates affect educational rigor and consistency, affecting students' academic success, graduation rates, and the overall success of the school community (Nguyen et al., 2020). Principals

who foster positive relationships and implement practices such as communicating the school's shared mission and vision, implementing a shared expectation for high student achievement, identifying roles and responsibilities, and providing meaningful professional development promote the retention of teachers (Tosh & Doss, 2019). Principal support is tremendously powerful when the school leader encourages and provides positive feedback to their teachers. Positive interactions and building relationships are paramount in retaining teachers that will ensure students' success. Changing students' academic success in rural areas can support positive social change for successful outcomes for students' futures.

## Conclusion

Teacher shortages across the nation primarily affect rural and urban districts and are more severe in southeastern states in the United States (Nguyen, 2020; Tran et al., 2020). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that higher turnover rates adversely affected the Southern States in math, science, special education, English, and world languages. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond stated, "The highest turnover rates tend to be in the South, reaching about 16% to 17% in cities and suburbs and 14% to 15% in towns and rural areas" (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 6). Principals in the rural SSD consistently contend year to year with teacher turnover and the challenge of retaining their teachers. Principals in rural areas face the challenges of retaining and recruiting teachers due to high-poverty areas, low pay, limited resources, and geographic isolation (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Principals often have a limited applicant pool of prospective teacher candidates in rural areas, making recruiting and

filling positions difficult (Taie & Goldring, 2017; Tran et al., 2020). Teacher turnover and retention patterns impact the educational system's structure, environment, and learning outcomes (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). This basic qualitative study explored K-12 principals' perceptions of the challenges and success of retaining teachers in the rural SSD.

Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover was the conceptual framework that provided the basis for this basic qualified research study. The themes derived from the principal's interviews were teacher burnout, challenges of the rural area, competitive pay, professional development, school culture and community, and principal support and leadership as elements contributing to teacher turnover. In addition to these themes, the principals identified the successes of principal support, building positive relationships, and school culture and community as factors helping combat teacher turnover in the rural SSD. This study presented influential factors such as organizational management, shared vision, and teacher support. These support strategies, accompanied by intentional professional development, can assist K-12 principals in addressing the retention of teachers, which may potentially decrease the year to year teacher turnover rates and increase student achievement.

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# Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Date:
Time:
Interviewee Code #:
Location of Interview:

| Parts of the Interview | Interview Questions and Notes |
|---|---|
| Introduction | • Hello, my name is Elizabeth Thomas. Thank you for voluntarily participating in the interview today for my research. This interview aims to explore the principal's perceptions about the challenges and successes of retaining teachers in a rural Southeastern district. The interview will last approximately 1 hour. I will begin the interview by asking you about your experience as a principal. I will then begin asking you questions concerning the challenges and successes you have experienced with teacher retention and turnover. Please feel at ease in being transparent and candid, as there are no correct or incorrect responses. Following the interview, I will examine your responses for data analysis purposes, which will be analyzed with the responses from your peers. To maintain confidentiality throughout this process, I will neither identify you in my documents nor allow anyone else to determine your identity in connection with your responses. At any time during the interview, you may decide to end the interview. In addition, this interview will be recorded by me and revisited by me in preparation for the completion of the research study.<br>• Do you have any questions before beginning the interview?<br>• Are you ready to begin the interview? |
| Research Question 1 | • How long have you been a principal? |
| Research Question 2 | • How long have you been a principal in this district? |
| Research Question 3 | • Why do you think teachers leave your school, the district, or the profession? |
| Research Question 4 | • What do you think makes teachers stay at your school, the district, or in the profession? |
| Research Question 5 | • How do you support both novice and veteran teachers?<br>• Please provide specific examples. |
| Research Question 6 | • What challenges have you faced in pursuing to retain your teachers?<br>• Explain how you challenge your leadership team in retaining teachers. |

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| Research Question 7 | • What successes have you had in trying to retain your teachers?<br>• Explain how your successes have impacted retaining teachers at your school.<br>• How is your leadership team involved in implementing successful strategies that retain teachers? |
| Research Question 8 | • What leadership strategies have you used to build a shared vision to encourage a sense of community within your school that aided in retaining teachers? |
| Research Question 9 | • To what degree of influence do you believe your leadership style has on a teacher's decision to leave or stay in your school, the district, or the profession? |
| Research Question 10 | • Describe the behavior you perceive principals can implement to influence a teacher's decision to leave or stay in your school, the district, or the profession. |
| Research Question 11 | • With your experience as a principal, what have you learned about retaining teachers?<br>• Are there practices you have found and implemented in your experience that are crucial to retaining teachers? |
| Research Question 12 | • Does the district provide professional development on teacher retention for principals? |
| Debrief | Thank you so much for participating in the interview. Your time is appreciated, and your comments are profoundly beneficial to this study. The purpose of this interview is to better understand the challenges principals face when trying to retain teachers. I am interested in your perception of the challenges administrators face when attempting to retain teachers. Throughout the next 7 days, I will transcribe this interview. If I have questions while transcribing the interview, I will reach out to you via email or phone. Once I transcribe the interview, I will email you a copy of the transcription for you to check the accuracy. During the data analysis process, I will analyze the data and identify themes. After completing the data analysis process, I will send you the transcript for you to review the accuracy or clarification of your responses. The results of this research study will help administrators understand the challenges administrators face when addressing teacher turnover. Complete confidentiality will be maintained throughout all phases of this study. The procedures for maintaining confidently are as follows: (1) I will be the only person who has access to the participant and district name or other personal information; (2) at the start of the study, each participant will be assigned a number to help ensure confidentiality; (3) all computer notes from the study will be |

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|---|---|
| | saved on a password-protected computer; (4) handwritten notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet, which only I have access; and (5) all documentation collected during the study will be shredded after 5 years. |
| Close | • Once again, thank you for your time. The interview will now end, and the recording will cease. |