

To: Colorado Center for Rural Education
From: Marzano Research
Date: April 8, 2022
Subject: Perceptions of Stipends From the Colorado Center for Rural Education

The Colorado Center for Rural Education (CCRE) administers a stipend program aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural Colorado. To promote more stipend applications and provide information about the results of the program, CCRE contracted with Marzano Research to examine stipend recipients' perceptions of the program and of their current work in rural schools.

Marzano Research administered a survey to 583 stipend recipients (233, or 40%, responded) and conducted interviews with five selected stipend recipients. Interviewees represented both mountain and plains schools and elementary and high school. The surveys and interviews collected information about the stipend recipients' current teaching assignment, perceptions of the program, perceptions of the impact of the stipend on their career and school, and perceptions of teaching in rural areas.

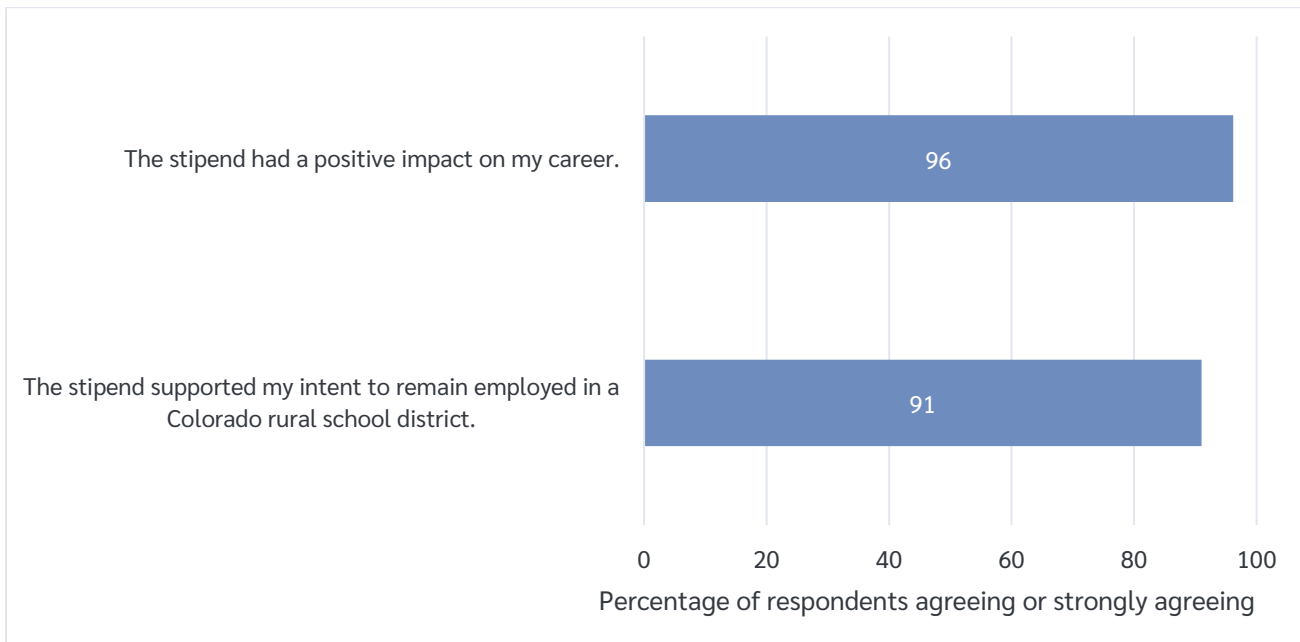
Key findings:

- Participants reported that stipends had positive impacts on teachers' careers, including creating new opportunities and improving teaching practice.
- Stipend recipients continued to teach in rural areas.
- Participants said that stipends resulted in positive benefits to students, including reduced teacher stress, increased opportunities, improved instruction, and improved resources.
- Stipend applications and processes were straightforward and easy for participants.
- Rural teaching presents both advantages and challenges to teachers.

Key Findings

Surveys of stipend recipients and interviews with selected recipients revealed key findings. Stipend recipients reflected on the impact of the stipend on teachers' careers and opportunities, the impact of the stipend on teacher retention in rural schools, and the impact of the stipend on students. On the survey, stipend recipients were asked how the stipend has affected their career (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The stipend had a positive impact on recipients' careers.



Interviews and open-ended survey items provided more detail about how stipends impacted teachers' careers. In addition, a total of 182 survey respondents shared details.

Stipends affected teachers' careers

Of the respondents to the open-ended question, most reported that the stipend was an important part of allowing them to enter the teaching profession, through both traditional and alternative routes. Many additional respondents reported that the stipend expanded opportunities within their school or district (e.g., new endorsements, new job roles) or reported that the stipend was used to work on an advanced degree or a license in a hard-to-staff area (e.g., special education).

One stipend recipient reported that the stipend allowed them to complete an alternative licensure program.

I had been teaching on a substitute license each year. Knowing that I had a chance to get a stipend, I went ahead and went into the TIP (Teacher Induction Program at Pikes Peak BOCES) and decided to go ahead and get my teaching license.

Additional impacts included improved morale or feelings about the teaching profession.

Stipends created new career opportunities for teachers

In addition, recipients indicated that the stipend directly allowed them to expand their career opportunities both within and outside school. A small group of respondents reported expanded opportunities within the school. For example, one participant was able to start a new agricultural education program in the school after using the stipend to complete an alternative education program.

I wouldn't have been able to start the Agricultural Program without (the stipend). Not only did I have to have my teaching certificate, but I had to add on the agriculture (endorsement) to even start the program.

Another stipend recipient credits the stipend for her ability to mentor other teachers early in her career.

However, as a third-year teacher, I'm already a mentor. I have a student teacher this year, and I think a lot of that comes from the fact that I was able to (use the stipend to) stay in this rural community, and I received a wonderful education at my small community college that focused on culturally linguistically diverse education. And now here I am as a third-year teacher, and they're saying, "Will you support other teachers?"

Recipients also reported using the stipend to expand their career opportunities outside the school (e.g., teaching concurrent courses at local colleges, opportunities to become involved in statewide initiatives). One was able to expand their role in providing concurrent education courses at a local college because of a stipend-supported master's program.

The big impact for me was the opportunity to really dig into concurrent teaching, and to finish up the classes I needed to be able to qualify for (the concurrent education) position.

Stipends influenced the decision to teach in a rural school

On the survey, ninety-one percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the stipend supported their intent to remain in a rural school. One stipend recipient reported that she considered moving to the Front Range for other jobs, but instead used the stipend to complete an education degree and stay in her rural community.

I don't want to do that (move to a more urban area). I want to stay here in a community of like-minded individuals with a diverse population, with the mountains that I love, with a small community, with the community that I grew up in. I didn't want to have to leave.

Stipends resulted in improvements in teaching practice

A small group of respondents reported that the stipend allowed them to participate in additional professional development, or that it allowed them to become a better teacher. For example, one

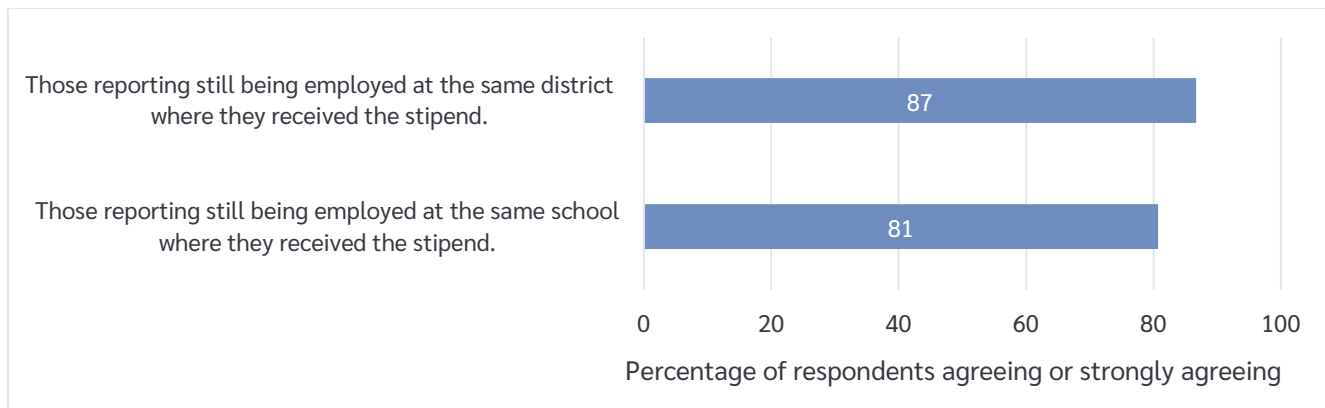
stipend participant used the stipend to achieve National Board Certification, resulting in improved teaching practice.

(The National Board Certification) is an opportunity to take and align our state standards, which are proficiency based, with proficiency-producing practices in the classroom. So, I think that the stipend is providing me with support to really push forward in the next couple years and shift my practice around so that I don't feel stuck anymore.

Most stipend recipients reported staying in the district or school in which they received their stipend.

One goal of the stipend program is to help recipients stay in rural communities. On the survey, eighty-one percent of stipend recipients reported staying in the same school, and eighty-seven percent said they were in the same district after receiving the stipend (Figure 2).

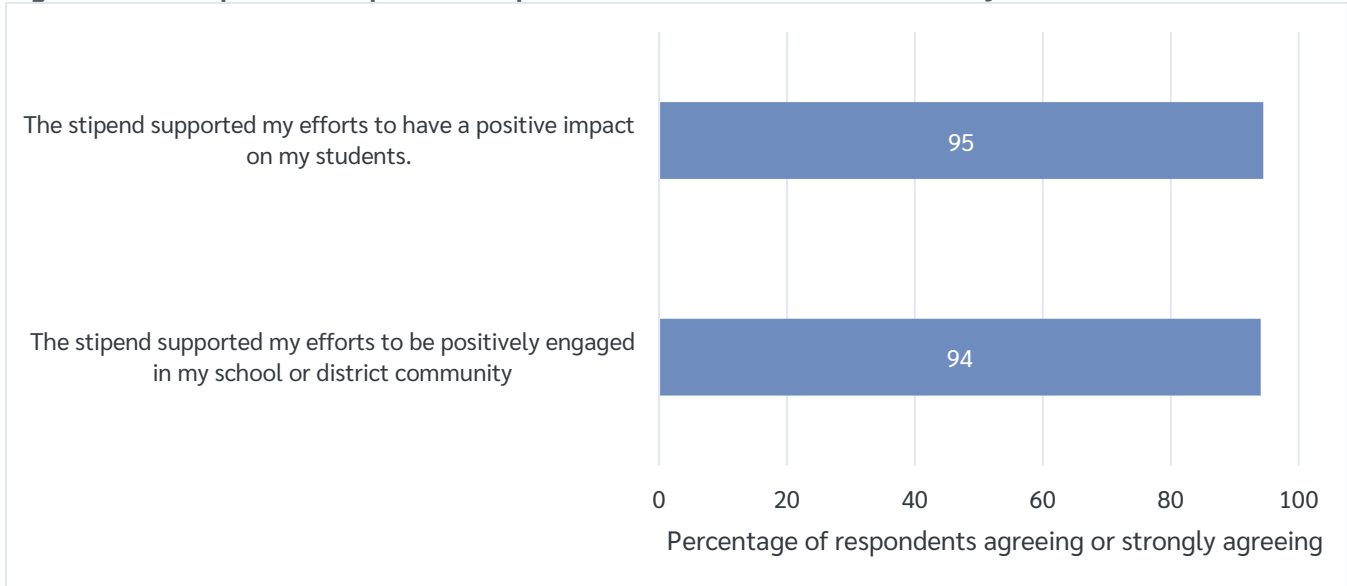
Figure 2: Stipend recipients stayed in the same school and district.



Most stipend recipients report positive benefits to students and rural communities

In addition to helping teachers stay in rural communities, the stipend program aims to have a positive influence on students, schools, and districts by supporting consistent instruction and ongoing relationships among teachers and students. On surveys, almost all (95%) of stipend recipients said the stipend supported efforts to impact students positively, and 94% reported the stipend supported efforts to positively engaged with the school or community (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The stipend had a positive impact on students and the community.



Interviews and open-ended survey items provided more detail about how stipends positively influenced students.

Overall positive benefits on students

Stipend interviews supported the positive impacts of the stipends on students. One noted:

Any support that rural educators can get changes the lives of the kids. Especially in a school like ours, where relationships are key.

Another recipient felt that the stipend changed her approach to her teaching job.

(The stipend) gives you a cherry on top and an incentive where it's like, you know what? I got paid to be out here. I'm going to give it all that I've got. I was always raised to give 110%, no matter what, but that stipend gave me (the opportunity to give) 150%.

Reduced stress

Many respondents reported that the stipend reduced teacher stress (e.g., financial stress, reduced need for additional job), resulting in a direct impact on students. Interviewees explained that because the stipend reduced their stress levels, they were able to focus more on teaching and meeting student needs. One recipient commented:

You can't pour from a cup that's empty. When we fill a teacher's cup, then that teacher has more to pour to their students. And when we eliminate the stressors from a teacher's life, such as a financial stress, which I think in rural school districts is one of their biggest stressors, when we eliminate a stress, we are filling up a teacher's cup. And then when we fill up that teacher's cup, then that teacher is then able to fill up the cups of all their students.

Improved teaching practice

Stipends of current rural teachers, such as National Board Certification stipends, are designed to support professional development. A large group of survey respondents and all interviewees reported improved teaching practice. One recipient commented that the stipend supported improvements in classroom practice.

The pedagogy that I was presented with in my teaching prep was very, very, very limited, not very detailed. I didn't feel like aside from the practice of being in a classroom and talking to people that there was a lot about, hey, this is what works. This is how language is learned. This is what you need to do to support learners. And so, for me, this is just like a refresh button because as I've looked at the resources and looked out there in the world, I feel like we do have those tools out there. This is a chance for me to really dig into that and improve my classroom practice.

Improved opportunities for students

A few respondents reported that the stipend resulted in improved opportunities for students (e.g., new in-school and after-school programs, course offerings, gifted and talented programs). One recipient supported the idea that the stipends resulted in additional opportunities for their students.

As soon as I started taking master's classes, I realized how much of that experience I could share with my students who are juniors and seniors, and who are thinking about college or not college, or what to do after high school. I could share my experience as a student, and as a researcher, and a writer in a more credible and authentic way, a way that they really related to. And I continue to do that because I continue to take classes. So, it set me up to be more collegial with my students, I think, to treat them as, in some ways as peers, and in some ways as students.

Another recipient noted that the stipend allowed him to become licensed, which in turn led to the development of an agricultural education program at the school. The career development aspects of this program have direct benefits to students.

The SAE (Supervised Agricultural Experience) side of it allows kids to look into different careers before they even get out of high school. We're small enough. We can help kids get into a type of a career, because the college path is not what it used to be. And it never has been in this rural school. I mean, we've got a lot of kids that have gone to great colleges and big colleges. But a lot of our kids want to do the hands-on stuff and go into those type of careers. So, I think it's going to open doors for a lot of the students here to go after those careers.

Better classroom resources

A few respondents also reported using the stipend funds to improve their classroom resources. One stipend participant noted that she used the stipend to buy new resources for her classroom.

My stipend impacted my students because it allowed me to buy different resources that they've never seen. They got a breath of fresh air with different resources (used) in different ways to get them intrigued and interested in the lessons that I was teaching.

New teachers

In addition, a group of respondents reported that the stipend directly resulted in new teachers for rural students, including filling hard-to-staff content areas like foreign language and special education, the completion of alternative licensure programs, and increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce.

Advantages of Teaching in Rural Schools

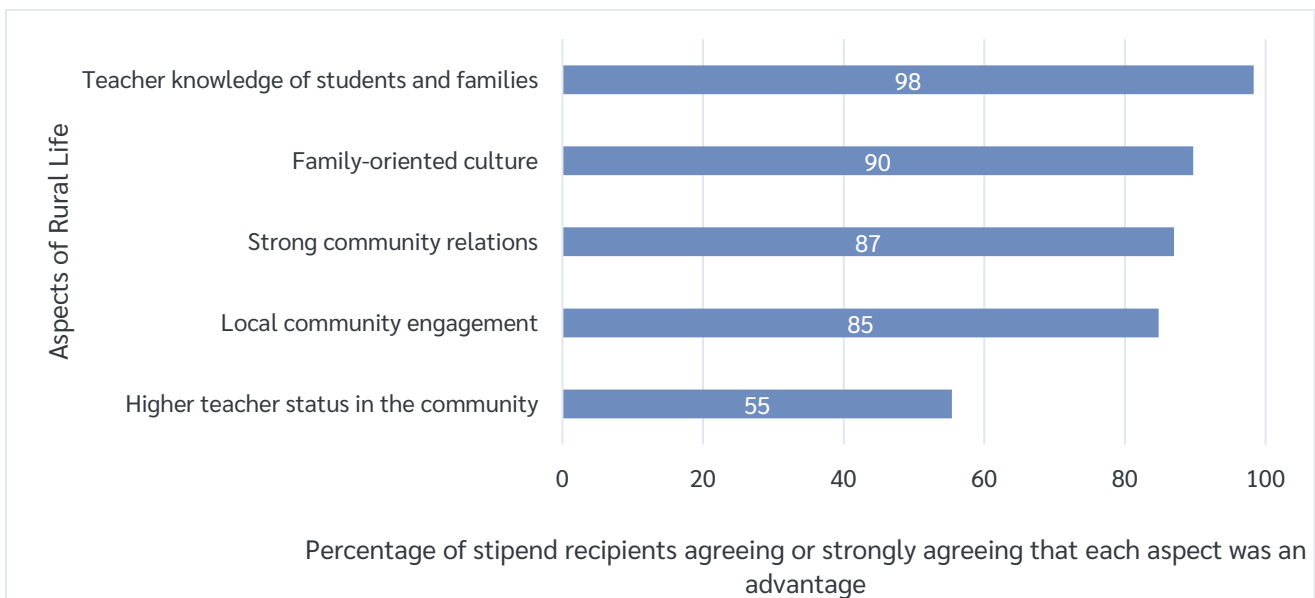
Understanding how teachers see the advantages of teaching in rural communities may help CCRE and other rural advocates recruit and retain teachers. Advocates might communicate these advantages to prospective teachers and might also work to ensure that these advantages are maintained and supported in all rural areas so that teachers stay. Stipend recipients felt that the key advantages to teaching in a rural community were the strength of relationships in the school and community, school factors such as a closer collegial relationship among staff, and the attractions and recreational opportunities in rural areas. (Figures 4-6).

Interviews and open-ended survey items provided more detail about respondent perceptions of the advantages of teaching in rural schools.

Recipients noted the strength of relationships in rural communities

Almost all survey respondents (98%) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers' knowledge of students and families is an advantage to teaching in a rural area. (Figure 4). Other advantages of teaching in a rural area on the survey included family-oriented culture, strong community relations, and local community engagement. However, fewer survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that higher teacher status in the community was an advantage in rural areas.

Figure 4: Relationships were an advantage to stipend recipients



Interviews and open-ended survey responses showed similar results and added more information about these advantages.

Relationships with students

Many stipend recipients emphasized their strong relationships with students as prime advantage to working in rural schools. One discussed these relationships

(The stipend) allowed me to make connections with these students in this rural community. I think that the community that we have here is so interesting and unique. I can't speak about what it's like in an urban community from firsthand experience, but I do know that in a small community, the relationships that we have are really meaningful and really powerful. So, when I think about the positive impact it had on me, I think about the students. I think about each individual relationship that I've had.

Knowledge of students

Another key advantage noted by students was their knowledge of not only their student's needs, and interests, but all students in the school. One participant focused on the advantages of watching students grow over time.

I know that each student here in this school. And I can see kids grow from fifth grade through 12th grade, see how they had changed and what had stayed the same. And I could help to offer them opportunities for them in a way that I might not be able to in a larger school.

Connection to the community

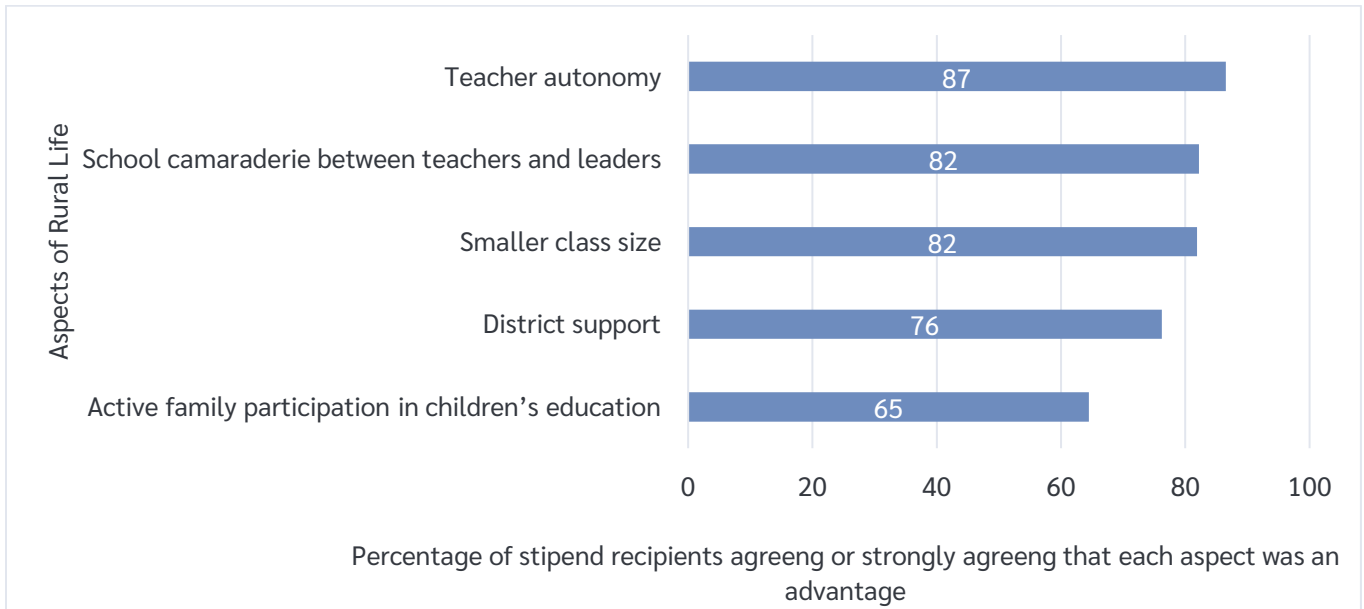
Recipients also felt very strongly connected to the communities in which they live and work. One stated very simply: "you're more tightly connected to your community". The participant goes on to say that

I'm friends with the parents of my students. I see them in my classroom, and then I see them in my grocery store, and then I see them on the ski hill, and I see them out and about in town, and that's really amazing. That is really powerful, because for me at the heart of teaching is relationships. And so, to have the relationship not only inside of my classroom, but then outside of my classroom within my community is really powerful, because it really gets to the heart of what our small-town community is about, is about relationships within our community. That kind of relationship helps to break down some of the barriers that people have with education

Recipients noted school factors as an advantage to teaching in rural schools

Stipend recipients also discussed school factors such as teacher autonomy, relationships within the school, class size, district support, and the relationship with student's families. Of these, teacher autonomy was important: 87% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that autonomy was an advantage of teaching in a rural area (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Rural school factors were an advantage to stipend recipients



Analysis of interviews and open-ended survey responses helped explain these advantages.

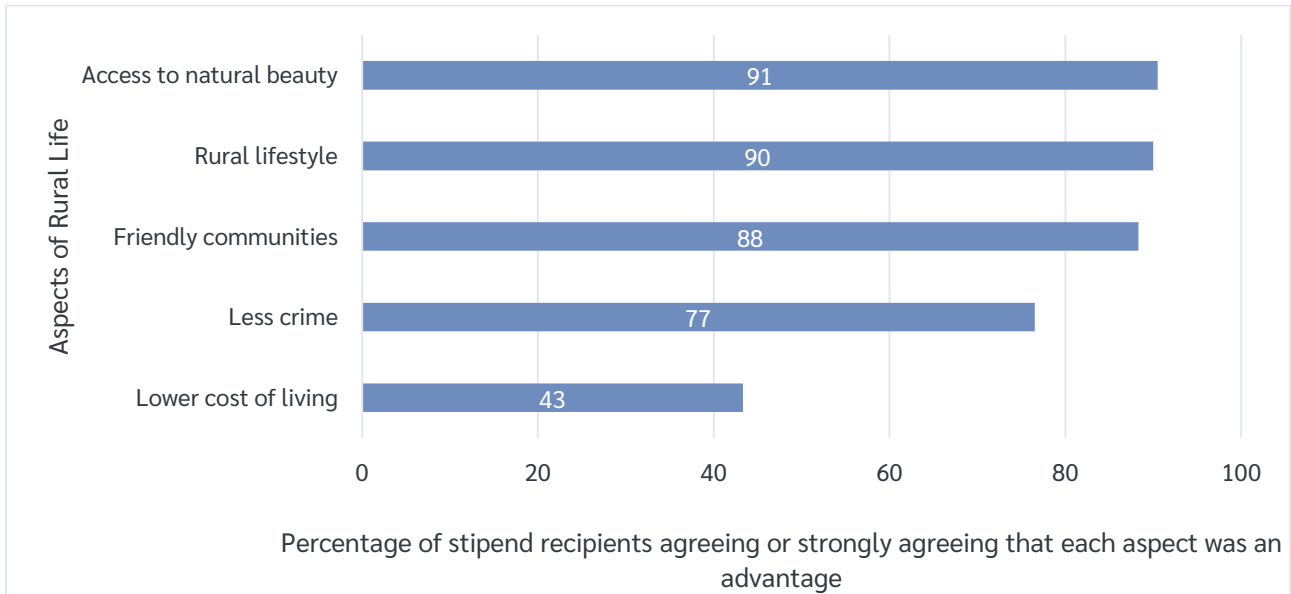
Collegiality

Stipend recipients also discussed how the size of the school resulted in a closer staff and increased collegiality. One noted that “because it’s a small school, I am able to be much closer to my colleagues.” This collegiality extended to supporting each other to improve. “We mentor each other because we don’t have the same resources we might have in the city.”

Recipients noted the attractions of rural areas and the rural lifestyle

Stipend recipients also spoke very strongly about the attractions of rural places, including natural beauty, rural lifestyle, friendly communities, and recreational opportunities. Many (91%) agreed or strongly agreed that access to natural beauty was an advantage of teaching in a rural community (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Rural life and lifestyles were advantages to stipend recipients



Similarly, in interviews and open-ended survey responses, one of the primary advantages shared by stipend recipients is the nature of rural places. One offered this reason for living in a rural place:

I like to be close to the things that I like to do. I can get out rock climbing or hiking or fishing or mountain biking or backpacking.

Challenges of Teaching in Rural Schools

CCRE and other rural advocates need to pay attention to how teachers see the challenges of teaching in rural communities. Advocates work with schools and others to mitigate these challenges. They might communicate honestly about challenges in the hopes to recruit teachers who are aware of and less concerned about these challenges. Ultimately, these actions could help recruit and retain more rural teachers. Stipend recipients felt that the key challenges to teaching in a rural community were establishing relationships in the school and community and school factors such as salaries, professional isolation, and increased duties, while other challenges related to the cost of living and lack of cultural opportunities in rural areas (Figures 7-9).

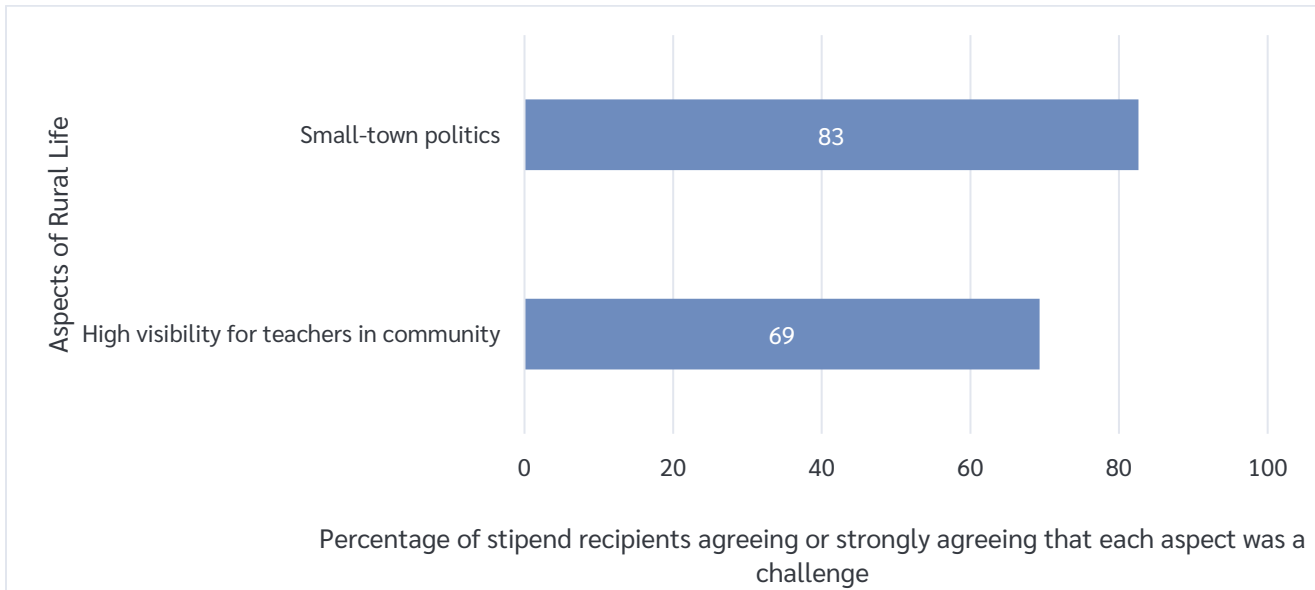
Interviews and open-ended survey items provided more detail about respondent perceptions of the challenges of teaching in rural schools.

Recipients acknowledged some challenges to establishing relationships in rural areas

While data showed that relationships in general were strong in rural communities, stipend recipients also focused on some of the challenges of small-town politics, establishing relationships in rural

schools, and the visibility of teachers in rural communities. For example, 89% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that small-town politics could be challenging in rural areas (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Relationships in rural areas presented challenges to stipend recipients



Interviews and open-ended survey responses showed similar results and added more information about these challenges.

Establishing relationships

Even though relationships were discussed as an advantage of teaching in a rural community, they also represented some challenges for recipients, according to the analysis of interviews and the open-ended survey responses. One recipient discussed the difficulties a teacher new to the community can have building relationships.

And then even though the people are amazing, one of the other things that can be challenging are also the people. Because we are a small community, what ends up happening is that people can be kind of cliquish. I hate to say that, but people have grown up here for a really long time, and integrating into a community that has been established for a while can be really challenging.

Another recipient noted that the biggest challenge was “connecting with a community that is way different from where I grew up.”

Visibility of being a teacher in a rural school

Another challenge —revealed in interviews and open-ended survey items— is the visibility of being a teacher in a small town. Recipients discussed how difficult it can be when everyone knows who you are and what you do. “There isn’t a place to get away from being a teacher.” Another recipient added:

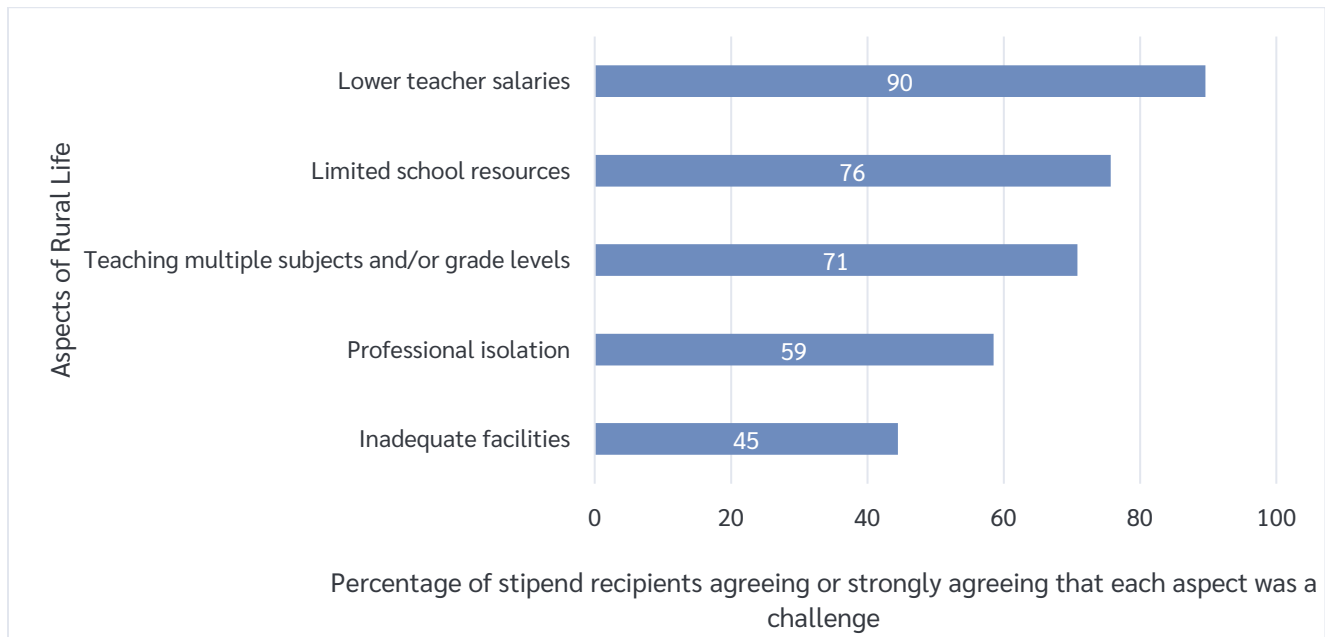
When you live, work, and recreate with the same group of people, it’s hard to separate all those roles. People feel really familiar with you and the personal/professional lines are blurred. Parents feel the need to say things they wouldn’t normally address with a teacher.

This creates challenges when there is an issue, as one recipient noted. “If there is an issue with a student, the whole school knows. Everything is told around here. There are no secrets.”

Recipients noted professional challenges related to teaching in rural schools

Stipend recipients also focused on rural school factors such as salaries, limited school resources, inadequate facilities, professional isolation, and additional duties. These factors often represented professional challenges for teachers. For example, 90% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that lower teacher salaries in rural areas were a challenge (Figure 8). Fewer agreed or strongly agreed that inadequate facilities were a challenge in rural school.

Figure 8: Teaching in rural schools presented challenges to stipend recipients



Professional isolation

Like the survey data, interviews and open-ended survey items showed that professional isolation was a challenge associated with rural areas. For example, in many schools, teachers may not have another similar content area teacher to collaborate with or discuss challenges with. One stipend participant noted that there is “a lack of colleagues who teach your subject to plan with.”

In addition, recipients noted difficulties in accessing opportunities for additional learning, through professional development or degree programs. One participant described a “number of hurdles between a rural teacher and getting further education,” adding that this can have a negative impact on students. “Rural students are getting a very different education because their teachers were so isolated.”

Duties

Recipients noted the challenges related to teaching responsibilities in rural schools:

Well, in a rural school, when you work as a high school teacher, you don't just teach a hundred students a day, you also do lunch duty, you might do bus duty, you work dances, you work concessions, you help to plan prom. You're expected to go to athletic events, and dances, and band concerts.

Another recipient noted the presence of many "side gigs" for teachers at the school (e.g., clubs, gifted and talented, coaching), meaning that "many teachers end up doing too much and are spread too thin."

Additional challenges related to the need to teach multiple content areas or levels.

My largest challenge is teaching across multiple grade levels and subjects. I teach five different classes during the day, and I must prepare for five different lessons each day. This challenge requires that I spend an unreasonable amount of time outside of school lesson planning and grading.

Salaries

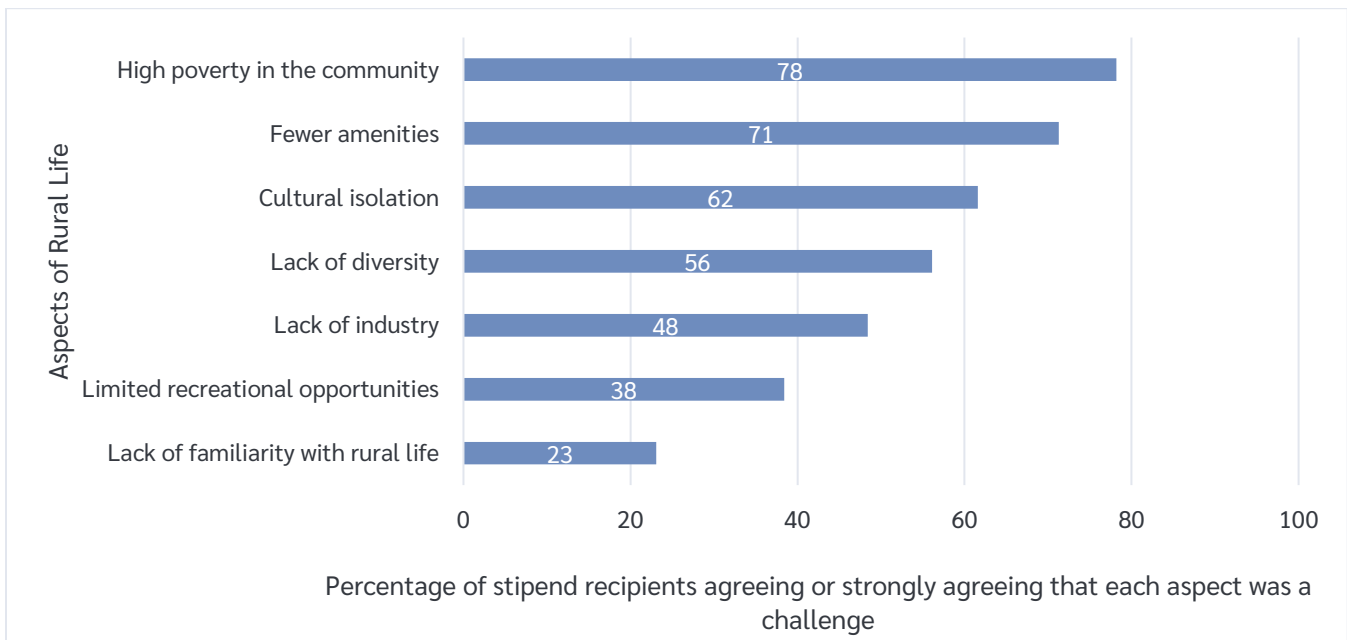
Many recipients noted low salaries as a major challenge, especially in higher cost-of-living areas in the state. One noted that "I live in a very expensive community, yet the teacher pay does not match the cost of living."

The cost of living, especially in mountain rural areas, was noted as a major challenge, especially when considered in combination with lower salaries. One recipient described the cost of living in their area as "astronomically out of proportion," while another discussed the cost of housing as a major concern. "Living in a resort town, housing is so, so, so difficult." As a result, one recipient reported "many teachers have multiple jobs during the school year, particularly newer or younger teachers."

Recipients noted the challenges of living in rural areas

Stipend recipients also focused on the challenges of living in rural areas, such as high poverty, fewer community amenities, lack of diversity, a lack of cultural opportunities, and the cost of living (Figure 9). For example, 78% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that high poverty was a challenge in rural areas. However, few of these stipend recipients (38%) reported that lack of familiarity with rural life was a challenge.

Figure 9: Living in rural areas presented challenges to stipend recipients



Lack of cultural opportunities

Recipients also discussed the lack of cultural opportunities as a challenge to rural living. “There are different cultural experiences. I mean, fewer cultural experiences.” Another noted “many people don’t understand the distance we have to drive to get to a ‘well populated’ town. Generally, more than one hour each way. Sometimes that’s extremely hard for people.”

This lack of opportunity also impacts students. One recipient reported that “we are so far removed from larger cities or towns that field trips barely happen.”

Perceptions of the Stipend Program

Stipend recipients were asked about their perceptions of the stipend program, including the application process and administration of the program.

Most recipients felt the stipend program application and processes were simple and straightforward

Most respondents felt that the process was easy, straightforward, and smooth. Recipients offered a few observations.

- “The application process was really smooth, I thought, and faster than I thought it would’ve been.”
- “It was absolutely smooth. Yeah, there were no challenges to it. They made everything easy.”
- “Applying for the stipend was an investment in time; however, it was well worth it.”
- “The process was easy and expectations for reporting were very reasonable.”

A few recipients noted challenges in navigating the program

Although most recipients found the stipend program easy to apply and navigate, a few noted challenges relating to communication, timing, marketing of the program, stipend requirements, and stipend distribution.

- A few respondents felt that communication during the application process could have been better.
- A few respondents felt that the timeline for applying was too short and approval notification took too long.
- A few respondents felt that the program could be marketed better.
- A few respondents felt that the program requirements created a barrier to applying.
- A few respondents noted difficulties in funds distribution.

This memo is part of a larger examination of the Colorado Center for Rural Education stipend program. Suggested citation:

Yanoski, D., Tedeschi, S., & Scott, C. (2022). *Perceptions of stipends from the Colorado Center for Rural Education (memo)*. Marzano Research.