

**To:** The Colorado Center for Rural Education  
**From:** Marzano Research  
**Date:** April 1, 2022  
**Subject:** Perceptions of the University and District or BOCES mini-grant program

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In 2018, the Colorado Center for Rural Education (CCRE) administered a program offering mini-grants to universities to develop and expand collaborative partnerships with rural school districts or Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). Partnerships were required to address one of the following areas: (a) recruit educators in high-need areas (e.g., mathematics, science, special education, culturally and linguistically diverse education, and specialized instructions services); (b) develop in-depth recruitment strategies that provide pathways into educator preparation programs that are reflective of regional needs; and (c) enhance professional development opportunities in areas of greatest need for rural school districts to ensure development of teacher leaders. CCRE contracted with Marzano Research to examine university project directors' and partners' perceptions of the mini-grant program and their current work in rural schools.

Marzano Research conducted interviews with four selected university project directors and two partners identified by these directors. The interviews collected information about the mini-grant process, activities and goal attainment, and implementation of the mini-grants. In addition, the interviews gathered information about rural teacher recruitment and retention in general. Key findings include:

- The mini-grant program has universal support from key stakeholders, who say the program increases educator recruitment and retention.
- The mini-grants provided opportunities for partners to learn from rural schools.
- Mini-grant partnerships have sustained their activities after mini-grant funding ended.
- Interviewees suggested several strategies for improving rural teacher recruitment and retention:
  - Show that teaching is a positive profession.
  - Target recruitment of potential teachers.
  - Invest in principal and teacher development.
  - Train mentor teachers.
  - Build networks of support.

Interviewees also offered recommendations about the application process and about how future grantees could implement their grants successfully. Table 1 describes the mini-grant projects that were funded by CCRE from 2018 to 2019.

**Table 1: Mini-grant projects**

Name	Partners	Activities
<i>Project ASPIRE: Actively Surpass Previous Instruction Resulting in Equity</i>	Regis University Morgan County School District Lake County School District	Provided teachers and administrators with coursework resulting in a certificate in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education
<i>A Multi-Pronged Strategy to Increase Retention and Recruitment in Northeast Colorado</i>	University of Colorado Boulder Northeast Colorado BOCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create lab classrooms and support master teachers</li> <li>• Provide master’s degrees/National Board Certification</li> <li>• Provide prospective teacher immersion weekend</li> </ul>
<i>The Partnership for Rural Educator Preparation (T-PREP): Developing &amp; Extending Capacity for Recruitment, Development &amp; Retention of Rural Teachers</i>	University of Colorado Denver Otero Junior College La Junta Public Schools Huerfano School District Karval School District Kit Carson School District Las Animas School District Manzanola School District Rocky Ford School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize a Rising Educators Gala to recruit local rural high school students into teaching</li> <li>• Provide scholarships to students in a grow-your-own, local, rural teacher education pathway</li> <li>• Provide professional development to rural teachers who host teacher candidates to build their capacity to mentor</li> </ul>
<i>Rural Leader Learning Communities: Leadership capacity building to improve recruitment and retention</i>	University of Northern Colorado East Central BOCES Northwest BOCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate professional development for teacher mentors to support new teacher induction</li> <li>• Create a principal and superintendent learning community for rural principals and superintendents</li> <li>• Develop an effective principal pipeline of rural school teacher-leaders</li> </ul>
<i>Supporting Early Recruitment and Retention of Valley Educators Project (Project SERVE)</i>	Adams State University San Luis Valley School Districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher cadet program for selected high school students</li> <li>• Coursework, mentoring, and scholarships</li> </ul>
<i>Colorado College Rural Organizational Pikes Peak Partnership (CCROPPP)</i>	Colorado College Pikes Peak BOCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshop to develop rural-specific courses</li> <li>• Early field experiences in rural settings</li> <li>• Rural-setting fellowship for Master of Arts in Teaching students</li> </ul>
<i>Southwest Colorado Rural Educator Recruitment and Retention Project</i>	Fort Lewis College San Juan BOCES Durango School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High School Teaching Academy for Native American and Hispanic students</li> <li>• Developing professional networks for special education and math teachers</li> <li>• Marketing scholarship and tuition waivers for Native American and Hispanic students</li> </ul>

## Key Findings:

The mini-grants influenced recruitment and retention.

Participants in the mini-grant program expressed universal support for continuing it. One participant said, “I just appreciated the grant, and it made a huge difference in the lives of teachers. And I think it’s a wise use of CDE’s money. I think at least for us, we were able to make the money go a really long way.” Another participant noted that “having ways to support teachers and students in rural districts has an important role in our state given the way that our populations are distributed.” Although most programs did not collect data specific to principal and teacher retention, individual programs offered anecdotal information.

**Improved principal retention.** One program reported that at least “two leaders that were intending to leave stayed as a result of the network.” Another reported that the leaders who participated in the program “may not be in the same seat on the bus, but they are still rural leaders.”

**Improved recruitment of teachers.** One program focused on building the teacher pipeline through the development of a high school teacher cadet program. According to the project director:

A few (students) have matriculated to (the local university) since they first started the program. Since then, we’ve already had some of them graduate. And I’m aware of at least two of them who did return to their communities and are currently serving these teachers in those communities. We’ve run a section of (the teacher cadet program) every spring since that pilot. And we’ve continued to draw in local students through that effort. Some are currently finishing their program or in our program and others; even if they didn’t come to (the local university), they did go to other colleges of their choice and are currently in the process of becoming licensed teachers or have already become licensed teachers.

**Mini-grant partnerships have sustained their activities after mini-grant funding ended.**

Of the mini-grant programs that were interviewed, all reported ongoing and sustained implementation of most program activities. For example, despite the ending of grant funding and retirement of key personnel, principal networks started under this grant program continue at the request of the people involved. In many cases the program, with other grant funding, has evolved into something bigger, including direct relationships with school districts to provide field experiences and the addition of graduate programs to professional development opportunities.

**The mini-grants provided opportunities for partners to learn from rural schools.**

Not only did the mini-grants offer positive benefits for the teachers, prospective teachers, and principals involved in project activities, they also benefited the partners. For example, partners were able to better understand the challenges faced by rural schools. One partner explained that all the providers gained knowledge and experience working with rural schools, saying, “This was helping (all partners to) even better understand what it’s like to be in a rural situation.”

## Strategies for improving recruitment and retention

Partners involved in these projects shared several strategies that they believe will help address school personnel recruitment and retention in rural areas.

### Improve recruitment by modeling teaching as an attractive profession.

One program partner stated that solving recruitment and retention is “90% retention and 10% recruitment.” The partner went on to say:

Juniors and seniors in high school who are thinking about what they’re doing are watching their teachers. And they’re tired. They’re exhausted. They hear the news criticizing them. They hear their parents criticizing them. They notice that their car’s nicer than the teacher’s car in the parking lot. And at the same time when kids are talking with their teachers, I believe that there’s a greater number of the teachers telling them you’re so talented, you should do something else besides this.

Having the people in the profession right now so excited to be there, and teachers telling them that they have autonomy, they get to be creative, they get to build relationships, they have the time to prepare meaningful interactive lessons, then I think that would be the biggest piece of recruiting that we could do. If we model teaching as an attractive profession, we will get new teachers.

### Conduct targeted recruitment of potential teachers.

Teachers and principals play an important role in encouraging students to participate in teacher cadet programs and selecting teaching as a career. Recruiting for teacher education programs should be done by those who know the student best. One partner described this as:

[Teachers and principals] know those students who would make good teachers, who have the skills and the mindset to engage in a program like this and see it through, and who would be most likely to stick around and serve and live in the community.

Targeted recruitment can also improve the diversity of the teaching workforce. One partner described efforts to increase the diversity of teaching candidates:

[Our] first goal was to try to expand our reach to Hispanic/Latino candidates. We’re a majority Latinx student population in this region, yet our teacher candidate population was only around 13% in terms of the background of our candidates. Fifty-three percent of the first cohort was from a Latinx background. We were really thrilled and pleased that our targeted recruitment efforts really helped us to diversify the candidate pool.

### Invest in teacher and principal development.

Program partners stressed the role that teacher and principal professional development, support, and growth played in retention. One partner noted that getting teachers the knowledge and skills they need encourages them to stay in the classroom. Another partner said:

[The best way] to address the teacher shortage is to retain the current teachers. And that's what the research says: if teachers don't leave, then that's the best way to solve teacher shortages. It was really apparent to us that the best way to retain teachers was to support the teachers to teach the changing student population, including the increasing numbers of emerging bilingual students and students with special needs.

Partners reported that the rural teachers they worked with “were hungry for professional learning,” and that investing in professional development will have positive benefits.

When teachers feel that they're being invested in, that's a good thing. I do think supporting teachers is important. And I think if we can do it in a humane way that provides information that they can take back to their classrooms, then I think that's important.

### Train mentor teachers.

Partners also discussed the role that mentor teachers play in retaining new teachers. Partners noted the necessity of providing training and support to mentor teachers.

So many of the mentors reported that they've never had training about how to be a mentor. Someone just asked them to do it, they hoped they were helpful, but they didn't really know (if they were) and they left. Simply providing some tools, resources, and a few people I might call makes a big difference.

Another partner reported the needs of mentor teachers, including coursework in mentoring and cognitive coaching. These courses give mentors the skill sets and the supports they need to be better mentors and coaches to students.

### Build networks of support.

Partners stressed the importance of building support networks for teachers and principals in rural areas. Teachers and principals experience isolation without fellow content-area teachers to network with.

We really wanted to break down that isolation and build relationships. If a principal is having a very difficult and maybe rather unique situation that they're having to resolve, they have someone that they have networked with on occasion or a lot, and be able to call them up and say, I've really got this issue and I don't know what to do.

## Recommendations for the application process

Participants offered several recommendations for improving the mini-grant program.

### Continue using the application process.

Overall, participants found the process of applying for the grants to be easy.

### Continue the kickoff meeting and networking opportunity.

Although initial impressions of the kickoff/sharing meeting were uneasy, participants found that they really valued hearing others' ideas and the time to work together with partners to develop

the application. In addition, the opportunity to network with other university or partner organizations was invaluable.

### Extend the timeline.

Participants found the timeline for both applying for the grant and completing project activities to be too short and at a difficult time of the year.

### Increase program marketing.

Participants expressed some concern about the marketing of the program, noting that they might not have known about it without an existing “in” and that the availability of the grant program “wasn’t necessarily well advertised, well communicated.”

Participants offered suggestions for improving program marketing:

**Make the grant program an annual thing.** Participants suggested that having an ongoing program at the same time every year that is announced in the same place would be helpful.

**Consolidate marketing of grant opportunities.** Another participant suggested a “pot of money” newsletter only about grant opportunities, stating that “I would be likely to open that one!”

**Communicate follow-up opportunities from the beginning.** Participants were unclear about follow-up grant programs. One stated that “without clear communication of next steps, we feel like we missed the boat.”

**Make sure everyone hears.** Participants also felt it was critical to continue to reach out to universities not on the front range because they don’t always hear about opportunities like this.

### Offer supports for grant applications.

Participants offered suggested supports for the grant application process:

**Tell us what to do.** Participants reported feeling some confusion about the process of applying for the grant and would have appreciated more clarity.

**Clarify the roles of all parties.** Participants expressed confusion about the responsibilities of the various partners. University financial systems can be difficult to navigate, even for those within the system.

**Coach grant writing.** Participants requested explicit coaching on proposal requirements and draft proposals to ensure that proposals fit requirements.

## Lessons learned for future grantees

Participants also offered lessons learned for future grant activities. These lessons may help future mini-grantees successfully implement the initiative:

### Be mindful of teacher bandwidth.

Professional development may be more impactful than graduate courses because the lower time and effort commitment may reach more teachers.

### Go to the student.

Consider offering transportation to the university for high school recruiting programs or for field experiences.

### Don't make this a university classroom.

Professional learning communities offering networking, problem-solving, and mutual learning may be more impactful than direct instruction. One partner described participant feelings about training and networking opportunities this way: "Please don't make this like a university classroom. We want honest, real-life discussions, solutions, opportunity to problem-solve. Hearing from others, seeing other buildings. We want real life, not a university classroom."

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

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