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Teachers on the Move: Examining Rural Teachers' Reasons for Leaving and Different Patterns of Teacher Mobility

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Abstract

Teacher shortages are a worldwide concern and may disproportionately affect rural schools. Teacher mobility is an important but under-studied factor in these shortages. Understanding teachers' reasons for different mobility decisions (leaving the profession; moving to another school) can inform policies to increase retention. This project used a subset of rural teacher data from a statewide exit survey collected from educators in South Carolina, a racially diverse state in the southeastern United States, who left their positions at the end of the 2023-24 school year. The survey, which was developed by the research team in association with a state-funded research consortium, allowed exiting teachers to indicate the relative importance of different factors driving their mobility choices, including personal reasons, job resources, job demands, and policy reasons. A multivariate multiple regression revealed that teachers working in rural distant schools placed lower importance on job demands and policy reasons for exiting than teachers in rural fringe schools. A logistic regression model analysis revealed that differences in teachers' perceptions of job resources, job demands, and personal reasons were statistically significantly related with different mobility choices, and that job demands were most strongly associated with leaving the profession completely. Ultimately, the findings from this study may highlight community assets that rural schools can leverage to retain teachers more effectively in the future.

Keywords: *rural education, teacher mobility, teacher retention, Job Demands-Resources model, teacher working conditions*

Introduction

Teachers play critical roles in the lives of their students and society as a whole. They foster their students' curiosity and creativity and help them become informed and productive citizens. Teacher-student relationships are the core of the educational experience for students, and these relationships may be particularly important for students in rural contexts (Huang et al., 2022). Rural schools can also serve vital roles in uniting and even reenergizing their communities

(Schafft, 2016). However, teacher attrition can jeopardize the positive roles that rural schools play.

Teacher turnover and shortages are worldwide concerns (Slanda & Lachlan-Haché, 2023; UNESCO, 2024), and they disproportionately affect rural schools (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural communities have many assets, including strong senses of kinship and place (Barter, 2008). However, the geographic remoteness of rural schools complicates teacher recruitment as educators tend to choose jobs closer to their hometowns or their preparatory programs (Edwards et al., 2024; Goldhaber et al., 2021). Therefore, rural schools in communities with smaller populations typically have fewer individuals to draw on to fill teaching positions. This recruitment challenge makes teacher retention an even more important priority for rural schools.

Studies have revealed common concerns across rural schools in different countries (e.g., distance to schools, teaching methods ill-suited to context; Çiftçi & Cin, 2018), but it is critical to recognize that rural contexts can also vary significantly (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Rural communities differ notably from nation to nation, partly because of the various ways rurality is defined. Regulations and policies governing rural education also vary dramatically between countries (EduRural, 2019).

Even within the United States, rural communities have significant differences based on local context. Western states, like Montana and North Dakota, tend to have geographically large, remote rural districts with small student populations, whereas eastern states, such as South Carolina and Florida, primarily have geographically small, fringe rural districts with larger populations of students (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2024b; Showalter et al., 2023). The demographics of rural communities in the United States are also heterogenous, as southeastern communities are largely Black, pockets of the rural southwest are largely Latino, and various rural areas throughout the country have high percentages of Indigenous populations (Rowlands & Love, 2021). Additionally, economic conditions vary notably across rural areas in the United States (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). These differences speak to the need to carefully consider local contexts when examining rural schools and phenomena like rural teacher retention (Williams et al., 2022).

School and teacher characteristics are also important to consider. Staffing issues tend to affect high-poverty rural schools more than their low-poverty counterparts (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Isolated rural schools might find recruiting or retaining novice teachers particularly difficult (Proffit et al., 2004). School traits, such as size and remoteness, and teacher characteristics, like age and gender, are not the reasons most teachers leave their positions, but they may be differentially related to factors driving teachers to leave. For example, younger teachers may be more likely to leave their positions for personal reasons, such as starting a family.

Working conditions are a major driving force behind teachers leaving their positions in rural schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Researchers are increasingly considering how different working conditions relate to teacher attrition. However, relatively few studies examine how specific working conditions relate to different mobility choices.

This study aims to build a more nuanced understanding of teacher mobility patterns in rural school districts in South Carolina. First, we examine how teacher and school characteristics related to teachers' reasons for leaving their positions after the 2023-24 school year. Then we show how different reasons for leaving contributed to teachers' mobility choices. Studying such differences may reveal retention dynamics that rural districts can address more effectively through carefully tailored policies.

Literature Review

Teacher Mobility

Much of the research literature about the teacher workforce focuses on shortages and teacher turnover, with school vacancies serving as proxies for shortages (Nguyen et al., 2022). In the United States, though, limited or inconsistent data complicate any picture of teacher staffing challenges (McVey & Trinidad, 2019). Additionally, merely analysing unfilled positions does not reveal the important aspect of dynamics within the workforce.

Some scholars have instead investigated issues related to retention. These researchers have examined teacher and school characteristics related to educators' likelihood to stay in their positions. Studies have shown that the least experienced (or youngest) and most experienced (or oldest) teachers are the most likely to leave (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Other research has demonstrated that, at least in the United States, female teachers are more likely to leave or consider leaving their positions than male teachers, and elementary teachers leave at higher rates than secondary teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Doan et al., 2023; Taie & Lewis, 2023). Scholars have also found that teachers are more likely to leave high-poverty and urban schools, and schools with lower-achieving students, than schools in other contexts (Djonko-Moore, 2016; Martin & Benedetti, 2025).

Much of this research does not distinguish between teachers moving to teach elsewhere and those leaving the profession entirely. From the vantage point of an individual school, this may not matter as the school is losing teachers. However, it is important to recognize the multi-faceted nature of teacher mobility because the mechanisms and forces that drive these movements are likely distinct and because different types of mobility affect the educational system in unique ways (Goldhaber et al., 2011; Vagi & Pivovarova, 2017).

Part of the problem in discussing teacher mobility is the inconsistency in the terminology used in the field. For instance, Taie and Lewis (2023) followed a long line of national American reports in distinguishing between attrition (leaving the profession) and mobility (moving to teach at different schools). In comparison, in their scoping review, Palma-Vasquez et al. (2022) distinguish between these phenomena but include both in the construct of teacher mobility. We agree with these latter authors that both groups of teachers make mobility choices. To stay aligned with the predominant terms used in the literature, we will use the terms *lateral movers* to designate teachers voluntarily moving to teach elsewhere and *leavers* to describe teachers choosing to leave the profession completely. However, since teachers are hired by districts in the United States, we limit *lateral movers* to teachers moving to a different district (interdistrict movement) rather than to another school in the same district (intradistrict movement).

Teacher Mobility in Rural Contexts

Historically, studying teacher mobility in rural contexts has been challenging because of the smaller numbers of teachers in these schools. Consequently, most research on rural teacher workforces has either consisted of localized, qualitative case studies (e.g., Tran et al., 2020), or studies based on national-level data (e.g., Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). The former provide nuance because they are locally situated, but patterns may be difficult to detect. The latter may reveal these patterns, but the broader view likely obscures important contextual information.

Recently, though, scholars have increased their focus on turnover in rural schools. Rhinesmith et al. (2023) found 94 studies fitting their systematic review on rural teacher recruitment and retention in the United States. They concluded that much of the literature focuses on financial incentives, such as signing bonuses, housing allowances, and stipends for travel, which tend to be effective. Their synthesis also revealed that working conditions, such as colleague support and mentoring, can play large roles in teacher turnover in rural schools.

Rhinesmith et al. (2023) noted that research into rural teacher mobility, beyond turnover, has increased in recent years. These examinations have mainly focused on where rural teachers are likely to move, especially compared to teachers in other locales. For example, Miller (2012) found that rural New York teachers were more likely to transfer away from rural contexts than suburban or urban teachers from their respective locales. Hanushek et al. (2004), in comparison, found that rural teachers in Texas were more likely to stay in rural schools when moving. These opposing findings help illustrate the importance of local context, even within the rural United States.

Scholars have also investigated the characteristics of rural schools and teachers in different states and how they relate to mobility patterns locally. For example, Elfers and Plecki (2006) found that higher-poverty schools in Washington state had higher percentages of lateral movers than other contexts. However, the percentage of leavers did not vary across poverty levels. They did not find differences based on the degree of remoteness or isolation of rural schools in the state, with about 20% of teachers in both contexts exiting the profession completely and just under 10% moving to a school in a different district.

Elfers and Plecki (2006) also found that novice teachers were almost equally likely to move laterally (19.7%) or leave the profession (20.8%) if they worked in a small, rural district, whereas the overall teacher population in these schools was more likely to be leavers (19.3%) than lateral movers (10.2%). Other personal characteristics beyond years of experience also appear to influence mobility choices. For example, Williams et al. (2021) found that female teachers in rural schools in Georgia were more likely to remain in those schools than male teachers, whereas teachers with advanced degrees were more likely to exit than educators without them. More specifically, Williams et al. (2021) found that, in Georgia, Black rural teachers moved between districts almost twice as much as White rural teachers.

Scholars examining rural teacher mobility recognize, though, that such patterns "*are likely to bear the stamp of the particular conditions in that state*" (Elfers et al., 2006, p. 124). Additionally, studies have shown that personal reasons and organizational conditions can play important roles in teachers' decisions to leave their positions (Elfers et al., 2006). However, little research has investigated how these factors may differentially motivate distinct mobility choices.

Job Demands-Resources Model

Teacher working conditions have been studied in a wide selection of empirical research on teacher attrition (e.g., García et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2016). Working conditions in rural schools may be different than other contexts in terms of advantages, such as greater autonomy, and disadvantages, like the need to teach outside of expertise area (Monk, 2007). However, research on how working conditions impact teacher mobility, especially in rural schools, is lacking, and studies examining working conditions in general have been largely atheoretical.

To strengthen the findings of this study, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model was adopted as a theoretical framework to conceptualize working conditions related to teacher mobility. This model posits that all occupations involve two key components associated with job-related stress: job demands and job resources. Demands refer to aspects that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort. Resources are features that support personal development and achieving work goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model has been adapted specifically to school contexts to understand better the day-to-day factors that influence teachers' well-being and effectiveness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Resources can serve as buffers against demands. However, if there is an imbalance between resources and demands, teachers can experience increased stress and burnout (Granziera et al., 2020), which may influence teachers to move schools (Sims, 2020) or quit the profession entirely (Björk et al., 2019).

Context

This study was conducted in South Carolina, a racially diverse state in the southeastern United States. Rural schools in the state have among the highest poverty levels in the country, and household mobility in rural parts of the state is also relatively high (Showalter et al., 2023). Over a third of the approximately 54,000 public school teachers in the state teach in rural schools (Cartiff et al., 2024), according to the NCES locale designations used in this study. These classifications are based on population density and proximity to an urban area (city) or an urbanised cluster (town). Based on these urban-centric criteria, cities and suburbs are urbanised areas with populations of at least 50,000 people, towns have populations between 2,500 and 50,000 people, and rural areas are those falling outside of the urban measure (fewer than 2,500 residents) (NCES, 2024b). NCES also subcategorises rural schools based on distance from nearby cities or towns as: close (NCES designation of 'fringe'; NCES code 41), somewhat removed (designation of 'distant'; code 42), or far away (designation of 'remote'; code 43). Less than two percent of rural schools in the state are classified as remote.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do rural teacher and school characteristics relate to teachers' reasons for leaving their positions?
2. Do lateral movers and leavers have different primary reasons for leaving their rural schools?

Methodology

Sample

Participants in this study were a subset of 1,019 participants who completed the state Teacher Exit Survey in 2024. Of that larger number, 215 were rural school teachers eligible for this study. Nine of those teachers were leaving involuntarily, 16 were changing roles (e.g., moving into administration), and 64 were retiring. Those 89 participants were excluded because they did not answer questions about their motivating reasons for leaving their positions. Five additional participants had incomplete data and were excluded.

This left 121 participants in the final sample. Those respondents were rural school teachers in 2023–24, who were voluntarily exiting their positions to teach in another district (lateral movers) or leave the profession completely (leavers). The sample demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: ***Sample Demographics***

Variable	Category	*n*	Percentage
Gender	Female	99	81.8%
	Male	22	18.2%
Race[a]	White	84	70.0%
	Black	21	17.5%
	Other[b]	15	12.5%
Education	Bachelor's degree	50	41.3%
	Graduate degree	71	58.7%
Mobility	Lateral mover	81	66.9%
Type	Leaver	40	33.1%
Remoteness	Fringe school	80	66.1%
	Distant school	41	33.9%
School organisational level[c]	Elementary	45	38.5%
	Combined (elementary + middle)	18	15.4%
	Middle	20	17.1%
	High	34	29.1%

[a] Race was unavailable for one participant.

[b] Participants who were not identified as either White or Black were combined into a single Other category due to small numbers.

[c] School organisational level was not available for four participants.

Procedure

In early April 2024, superintendents and personnel administrators from all public school districts in the state were emailed an invitation to participate in the Teacher Exit Survey. The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of South Carolina (#Pro00135523). Of the 73 traditional and three charter districts contacted, 29 districts provided emails for teachers who were not renewing their contracts. Eligible teachers in these districts were emailed a link to the survey in May 2024 and were given until late June 2024 to complete it. Eligible teachers received reminder emails with the link until the survey closed.

The survey employed branching logic. Participants were separated into involuntary and voluntary departers first. Voluntary departers were further classified as retirees, role changers, lateral movers, or leavers. Only participants in the latter two categories answered questions about reasons for exiting. These reasons fit into the categories: (1) job demands, (2) job resources, (3) personal reasons, and (4) policy reasons. Leavers also answered questions about career reasons, but these were excluded from analysis as lateral movers were not asked to respond to them. Responses were matched with data supplied by the South Carolina Department of Education to provide participant demographic information such as gender (0 = male), race (0 = White), education level (0 = bachelor's degree), and years of experience (mean = 11.7, median = 10.0).

School organisational level and poverty information were collected from the 2023-24 state School Report Cards. The school level variable was dummy coded (0 = elementary schools). School poverty was a continuous variable representing the percentage of pupils in poverty (mean = 65.9%, median = 68.7%). In our sample, all the rural schools were either fringe or distant (0 = fringe).

Measures

In association with a state-funded research consortium mandated with administering an annual voluntary exit survey, our research team developed the Teacher Exit Survey to measure the reasons driving teachers' decisions to leave their positions in PK-12 (pre-kindergarten through high school) public school settings. Item development followed the procedure proposed by Boateng et al. (2018), which includes identifying domains, generating items, and evaluating content validity.

Table 2: ***Details about the Teacher Exit Survey***

Dimensions	Reliability (Cronbach's α)	Items
Job Demands	.839	Extensive administrative tasks (e.g., meetings, paperwork, compliance reporting).
		Frequency with which students lacked engagement.
		Frequency with which students misbehaved.
		Frequency with which my teaching was interrupted by student assessments.
		Frequency with which my teaching was interrupted by other school activities.
		Insufficient time during the school day for lesson planning and preparation.
Job Resources	.873	Insufficient administrative support.
		Insufficient communication with the principal.
		Insufficient influence over school policies and practices.
		Insufficient relevant professional development provided.
		Insufficient support or positive relationships with my colleagues (e.g., fellow teachers, school staff).
		Insufficient support or positive relationships with the parents of my students.
		Insufficient autonomy in my classroom.
		Insufficient physical resources (e.g., textbooks, computers).
		Insufficient leadership opportunities or career advancement.
Personal Reasons	.487	I wanted to take a job more conveniently located to where I live.
		I moved or am planning to move.
		I wanted or needed a higher salary and/or better benefits.
		I wanted to teach a different subject area or a different grade level.
		I needed a better work-life balance.
		I was influenced by other personal life reasons (e.g., health, pregnancy/childcare, caring for family).
Policy Reasons	.740	Dissatisfied with the mandated curriculum and/or standards.
		Dissatisfied with the student grading and promotion policies.
		Dissatisfied with the minimum salary schedule (step increases).
		Dissatisfied with the teacher evaluation procedures.
		Dissatisfied with the teacher recertification process.

We reviewed the existing literature on teacher exit surveys and teacher working conditions as framed by the JD-R model. Through this content analysis, we identified four dimensions affecting teacher mobility: job demands, job resources, personal reasons, and policy reasons. The reliability coefficients for each dimension and the individual items measuring them are shown in Table 2. Participants indicated the level of importance of different items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all important, 2 = Slightly important, 3 = Somewhat important, 4 = Very important, 5 = Extremely important).

Data Analysis

Four observations had missing data on the school organisational level variable, and one had missing data on race. These five cases were excluded from the analysis for the first research question. Additionally, two items on the job resource scale each had one missing value. Rather than excluding these cases, the analysis used the average score for the resource scale, ensuring data preservation while maintaining analytical consistency.

To address the first research question, we conducted a multivariate multiple regression analysis, a statistical method that assesses the effect of a set of predictors on multiple dependent variables (Goldwasser & Fitzmaurice, 2001). Prior to the analysis, the core assumptions were tested and met, including multivariate normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, absence of multicollinearity (all VIF values were below 10), and independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson test values close to 2) (Draper, 1998; Rubinfeld, 2011). The four dependent variables (average scores for resources, demands, policy, and personal reasons) were modelled as functions of teachers' demographic characteristics (race, gender, education level, and years of experience) and school characteristics (poverty, locale, and school organisational level). The multivariate test statistic (Wilk's Lambda) was evaluated to assess the significance of the overall model. Univariate tests and parameter estimates were reported for interpreting the relationship between predictors and outcome variables.

To address the second research question, we utilised logistic regression, a statistical method used for modelling the relationship between one or more predictors and a binary dependent variable (Hosmer et al., 2013). First, descriptive statistics, such as mean scores of demands, resources, personal and policy reasons across leavers and lateral movers, were calculated. Three key assumptions of the logistic regression analysis were then evaluated. The absence of multicollinearity was assessed using a generalised variance inflation factor (GVIF). Linearity was examined using residual diagnostics, which yielded one outlier observation with high Pearson and deviance residuals. Further diagnostics showed that including this observation would substantially impact the chi-square and deviance statistics (UCLA Statistical Consulting Group, 2024). After removing the outlier, we plotted a continuous predictor against the log-odds of the predicted probabilities. In all four cases the linearity assumption was met.

In this analysis, the binary outcome variable was the teachers' mobility option (0 = leaver, 1 = lateral mover), which was regressed on four independent variables: resources, demands, policy, and personal reasons. To interpret the direction and magnitude of the relationship between a predictor and the outcome, we used odds ratios (ORs), which estimated the change in the odds of being a lateral mover versus a leaver for a one-unit increase in a predictor. We followed Hosmer et al.'s (2013) recommendation for logistic regression analysis with a smaller sample size to estimate confidence intervals based on the profile log-likelihood.

Findings

Research Question 1

To address the first question, we tested the model with four dependent variables associated with demands, resources, policy, and personal reasons (Table 3). The omnibus test yielded statistically significant results for the overall model (Wilks Λ = .59, $F(40, 388.6) = 1.43$, $p < .05$). Remoteness was the only statistically significant predictor (Wilk's Λ = .91, $p = .05$) at the multivariate level. Further investigation at the univariate level indicated that remoteness was significantly associated with demands-related and policy reasons but not with personal and resources-related reasons. In the two cases of significant relationships, teachers working in rural distant schools, compared to their peers in rural fringe schools, placed lower importance on reasons associated with demands (β = - .6, t = - 2.43, $p < .05$) and policy (β = - .75, t = - 2.99, $p < .01$). Additionally, gender played a role in the teachers' perceptions of demands-related reasons. Specifically, rural female teachers rated the importance of reasons associated with job demands .67 standard deviations (β = .67, t = 2.59, $p < .05$) higher than male teachers. In other words, the consideration of demands was not as important for rural male teachers in their decision to leave their current teaching position.

Table 3: Multivariate Multiple Regression Analysis

	Multivariate Tests			Univariate Analysis			
Variable	Wilk's Λ	*dfs*	*F*	Demands (b)	Resources (b)	Policy (b)	Personal (b)
Gender	.91	4, 102	2.25	.67*	.47	.33	-.16
Years of Experience	.98	4, 102	.42	.002	-.09	.01	.03
Race	.90	8, 204	1.37				
Other				.11	.37	.11	.49
Black				-.37	-.48	-.41	.4
Education	.94	4, 102	1.69	-.28	.07	-.26	.02
Remote	.91	4, 102	2.48*	-.6*	-.43	-.75**	-.06
Poverty	.95	4, 102	1.41	.13	.22	.03	-.05
School Level	.87	12, 302	1.26				
E/M[a]				.11	.12	.51	-.24
Middle				.52	.09	.27	-.14
High				.1	.31	.14	-.06

Note. $N = 116$.
Coefficients were fully standardised for continuous variables and partially standardised for categorical variables.
Demands Adjusted R^2=.095; Policy Adjusted R^2=.058; Personal Adjusted R^2=-.049; Resources Adjusted R^2=.026.
[a] E/M = Combined Elementary and Middle School.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Research Question 2

Descriptive statistics for teachers' responses to items tapping into departure reasons are reported in Table 4 separately for leavers and lateral movers. On average, compared to lateral

movers, leavers gave greater importance to reasons associated with demands and policy-related reasons and lower importance to personal and resource-related reasons. The smallest difference between the two groups was observed in the policy-related reasons. It should be noted that both groups rated the importance of policy reasons as the lowest. The two groups differed the most in their perception of personal reasons. Lateral movers rated personal reasons highest among the four types of reasons, while leavers assigned the highest importance to job demands.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Reasons for Leaving by Exit Type

	Leavers			Lateral Movers		
	n	***M***	***SD***	***n***	***M***	***SD***
Demands	39	2.67	1.12	81	2.42	1.14
Resources	39	2.12	0.95	81	2.30	1.05
Policy	39	1.96	0.89	81	1.91	0.92
Personal	39	2.32	0.69	81	2.83	0.88

Following this descriptive analysis, we fitted a four-predictor logistic model to the data with independent variables representing reasons for leaving, and the dependent variable representing the teacher mobility option (leaver = 0). The results are reported in Table 5, with both log odds coefficients and odds ratio values. As indicated by the likelihood ratio test [$\chi 2$ (4) = 19.55; $p <$ .001], the four-predictor model was more effective compared to a baseline intercept-only model and resulted in the following coefficients:

$$Logit(Y_i) = 1.26 - 0.71 * Resources + 0.76 * Demands + 0.07 * Policy - 0.97 * Personal$$

Table 5: *Summary of Logistic Regression Model of Leaving the Teaching Profession*

Predictor	***B* (*SE*)**	***OR*** **(95% *Profile log-likelihood CI*)**
Resources	-.71* (.32)	0.49 [.25, .90]
Demands	.76** (.29)	2.13 [1.23, 3.88]
Policy	.07 (.33)	1.07 [.55, 2.06]
Personal	-.97*** (.29)	0.38 [.21, .65]

Note. $N = 120$. $\chi^2(4) = 19.55$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The three coefficients for resources, demands, and personal reasons were statistically significant. A one-unit increase in the perceived importance of demands as a reason for leaving was associated with a 2.13 factor increase in the odds that a teacher left the teaching profession, constituting a 113.5% increase in the odds. In other words, teachers were more likely to leave rather than move to a different district if they perceived the importance of leaving due to demands as higher. A one-unit increase in the perceived importance of resources as a reason to depart was associated with a 0.49 factor decrease in the odds of a teacher leaving the profession, constituting a 50.7% decrease in odds. Conversely, this also indicates that teachers who perceived resource-associated reasons for leaving as higher were more likely to move to a different district rather than choose to exit the profession. Lastly, a one-unit increase in the perceived importance of personal reasons was associated with a 0.38 factor decrease in the odds that a teacher left the profession, constituting a 62.1% decrease in the odds. Similar to the resources independent variable, this indicates that teachers with stronger perceived personal

motives were more likely to move to a different district than leave the profession altogether. Overall, teachers' perceptions of the importance of demands had the strongest association with the likelihood of teachers exiting the teaching profession.

Discussion

This study investigated teachers' reasons for leaving their positions in rural schools in South Carolina. Specifically, we examined relationships between teacher and school characteristics and different reasons rural teachers gave for leaving their positions. We also analysed whether lateral movers and leavers had different primary reasons driving their choices.

Regarding the first research question, the only statistically significant personal characteristic was gender. Teachers' personal characteristics are not truly reasons they chose to leave the profession or move to a new district. However, these traits are related to experiences individuals have in their positions, meaning that teachers with shared personal characteristics may engage in similar decision-making patterns (Grissom et al., 2016). In our findings, rural female teachers attributed their choice to leave more to job demands than their male peers. This may be indicative of a gendered differential in the magnitude of demands faced by teachers. For example, Lin et al. (2024) found that female teachers in the United States dealt with higher proportions of verbal abuse and physical violence than their male counterparts.

Concerning school traits, the model revealed that teachers in distant rural schools placed less importance on demands and policies in their decisions to leave than teachers in fringe rural schools. Distant rural schools generally have smaller student populations than fringe rural schools and tend to have lower pupil-to-teacher ratios (NCES, 2024a). These factors may reduce workload and student behaviour demands on teachers in more isolated contexts.

Further investigation is needed to build a more nuanced understanding of how teacher gender and school remoteness relate to specific job demands. Few studies have investigated teacher differences between fringe and distant schools (Welsh, 2024), and the existing ones have largely focused on restricted resources in more remote schools (e.g., Bright, 2018). Analyses into gender effects need to take into account that they may result from interactions with other professional (e.g., school level, subject area) and personal (e.g., age) factors. Findings will also need to be considered in the framework of institutionalised gendered roles in the profession (Toropova et al., 2021).

The analysis that focused on the second research question revealed that leavers and lateral movers were statistically significantly different in the emphasis they placed on job demands, job resources, and personal reasons as factors behind their mobility choices. Lateral movers placed greater importance on job resources and personal reasons as motivating factors for leaving their positions. These rural teachers may see these factors as context dependent and believe that they can find better conditions in a different district.

In contrast, participants who emphasised the importance of job demands over other factors had increased odds of leaving the profession completely. Previous research along similar lines is limited, but Kukla-Acevedo (2009) did find that heightened perceptions of student misbehaviour were related more strongly to novice teachers leaving the profession instead of moving to teach elsewhere. Rural teachers who perceive extreme job demands may believe that those stressors would be similar in other districts and that quitting teaching is their best option.

Ultimately, our analyses reveal that distinguishing between lateral movers and leavers may provide valuable and actionable insights toward promoting increased teacher retention in rural contexts. Rural districts losing teachers to other districts may need to focus on increasing or improving job resources for their teachers. For example, training administrators to engage in people-centred leadership may be particularly effective in building trust and collaboration in rural

schools (Tran & Dou, 2019). Teachers leaving the profession, though, may have reached a tipping point with an excess of demands that they do not see a potential to solve by moving to a new district. Districts seeing exiting teachers leave the profession may need to focus on practices that reduce demands. In circumstances in which reducing demands is not feasible, providing supports aimed at mitigating specific demands may still be beneficial. For example, discipline-targeted administrative support may reduce the toll of student misbehaviour. Additionally, teachers who feel like they play a role in school decision-making may display stronger professional commitment (Park et al., 2020), so promoting shared governance may increase teacher retention even when demands are high.

It is important to recognise the limitations of this research. As Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) pointed out, the predictive power of exit surveys may be limited because only departing teachers are polled. They argued that teachers who choose to stay in their positions may have similar challenges, which should be considered. The absence of stayers is an issue we acknowledge in our data. The sample also was limited by two levels of self-selection bias. First, superintendents had to opt in for their districts, and superintendents who did not opt in may lead districts that differ in meaningful ways compared to those in the sample. Additionally, filling out the survey was voluntary in participating districts. Based on broader statewide trends (Cartiff et al., 2024; Dmitrieva et al., 2025), we strongly suspect that leavers were underrepresented in our sample, and those leavers anticipating a possible return to teaching may have been more likely to participate than those leaving permanently. These possible sources of bias, along with the small sample size, limit the strength of our conclusions. To address some of these limitations, we plan in the future to link results from the exit survey to a statewide teacher working conditions survey. Using these measures in conjunction would provide a longitudinal view of stayers and exiting teachers that could be valuable, especially as teachers may not be driven out of their positions by short-term perceptions of their job but instead leave when they see conditions worsening over time.

We also recognise that only interdistrict lateral movers were eligible to complete the survey, as intradistrict movers are considered to be retained by their employing district. Intradistrict mobility in rural areas is likely relatively low, as rural school districts tend to have fewer schools (Williams et al., 2021), but teachers moving to new schools in the same district may have different motivating reasons than interdistrict lateral movers (Goldhaber et al., 2011). Since most teachers' greatest impact comes from the students they teach and the colleagues they work with daily, studying school-level retention is critical and may help reveal equity issues (Elfers et al., 2006).

Finally, it is important to recognise that local context likely influenced the results of this analysis. Despite its quantitative nature, these results may not generalise to rural teachers in other areas of the United States or the world. There also may be important differences even within the state. Follow-up qualitative investigations could investigate whether this is the case.

Conclusion

Many scholars have recently tried to illuminate the assets of rural communities. It is important to acknowledge these positive conditions (e.g., potential for close-knit relationships) and to recognise that they are frequently mirrored by challenges (e.g., limited populations from which to draw workers). Recruitment obstacles, such as lower compensation (Brenner et al., 2021) and professional isolation (Rhinesmith et al., 2023), may amplify the importance of teacher retention. Teachers leaving rural schools make distinct mobility choices. Understanding differentiated forces driving those choices may help districts retain those teachers. The results of this study indicate that teachers' perceptions of job demands may be meaningfully related to their gender and school remoteness. In general, rural female teachers seemed to ascribe their leaving to job demands more than their male counterparts. Teachers in distant schools placed a lower value on

the importance of job demands as a reason for leaving than teachers in fringe schools. Additionally, teachers leaving the profession entirely were more likely to endorse job demands as the reason behind their decision than lateral movers who rated personal reasons as more important. Rural schools could examine their departing teachers' choices and tailor policy changes to address them and enhance retention.

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