

Rewriting the Rural School Recruitment and Retention Narrative



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program



Peter Barron, Superintendent, St. Paul Education
Regional Division: barrpete@sperd.ca

Edgar Schmidt, Leadership Consultant:
edgar.schmidt.consulting@gmail.com

Bonnie Stelmach, Professor, Faculty of Education,
University of Alberta: bonnies@ualberta.ca

The Plan

We will share and generate discussions based on:

- field-based observations and experiences
- two Alberta-based research studies
- evidence-based strategies from research

SLQS Competencies emphasized:

- Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning
- School Authority Operations and Resources
- Managing School Operations and Resources

LQS competencies emphasized:

- Modelling Commitment to Professional Learning
- Managing School Operations and Resources

Session Objectives

As a result of participating in this session, participants will have the opportunity to:

- (a) apply Alberta and international research to analyze local recruitment and retention data, identify contextual workforce pressures, and inform strategic planning (LQS 2; SLQS 2 & 6)
- (b) critically examine deficit narratives about rural schools and reframe them to support equitable, sustainable workforce strategies (LQS 3; SLQS 3)
- (c) explore partnership-based leadership approaches to strengthen rural teacher recruitment, retention, and long-term school authority excellence (LQS 8; SLQS6)

Country Schools vs City Schools



Attracting and Retaining Staff in St. Paul Education



CASS Workforce Research Study – Selected Findings

Purpose of the study

- To determine and anticipate current and future K-12 teacher and school-based educational leaders workforce needs and trends throughout Alberta.

Research Questions

- What are the current and future K-12 teacher workforce needs and trends in Alberta? (2024)
- What are the recruitment and retention strategies used by school authorities to address teaching and leadership workforce needs? How effective are these strategies according to system leaders?

See: Education Workforce Study - Teacher and School Leader Recruitment and Retention in Alberta

Methods

- **Survey** of all charter, francophone, public and separate school authorities in Alberta
- **Analysis of collected data** –
 - Quantitative – descriptive statistics
 - Qualitative – text-based responses themed and aggregated

Key Findings

63%

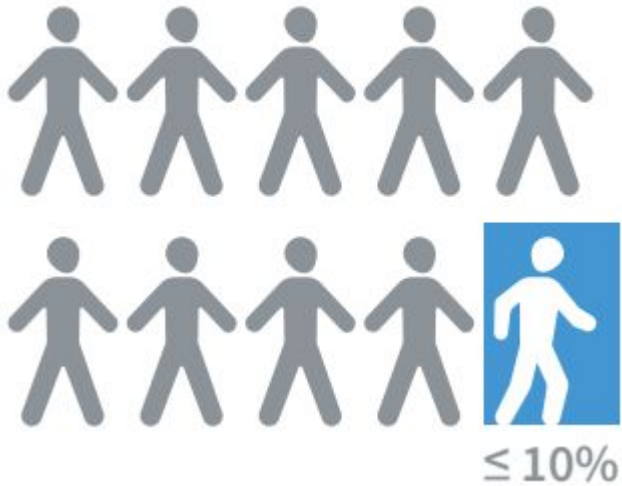
72%

In total, 54 of 86 (or 63%), of the invited school authorities across Alberta participated in the survey. All CASS Zones were represented, as were all school authority types (Charter, Francophone, Separate, Public).

The total student population represented by responding school authorities is 527,381 out of 732,203, which is 72% of the total student population of invited survey participants.

Teachers

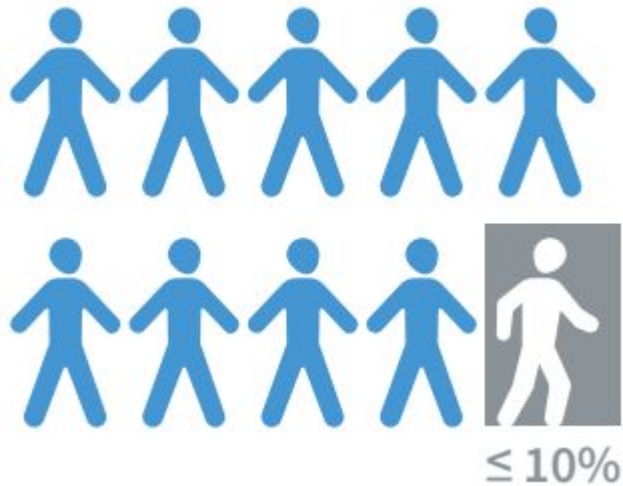
TEACHERS



A cross-comparison analysis of several survey questions shows that trends from 2019 to 2023 indicate that it is more common for 10% or less of teachers to annually leave a school authority.

School Leaders

SCHOOL LEADERS



The five-year trend of school leaders leaving shows a stable rate with very little change within percentage categories. Like the teachers, it was more common for 10% or less of school leaders to leave on an annual basis.



Reasons for Leaving School Authorities

The most frequently occurring theme for reasons to leave a school authority was **life change**.

Life change was comprised of four sub-themes: **moving**, **retirement**, career change, and personal reasons. From those sub-themes, the top two are moving and retirement.

Most Effective Recruitment Strategies - Teachers

- **Advertising** (e.g. career fairs, general education recruitment websites, local school division websites) and
- **Benefits** (e.g. bursaries or awards for those committing to stay in the division, mileage incentives, family/ partner supports) were the most common and effective actions responding school authorities took to recruit teachers.

Least Effective Recruitment Strategies

TEACHERS

The least effective recruiting action was **advertising**. Interestingly, advertising was both the most and least effective recruiting strategy for teachers.

For example, actions such as participating in job-fairs or using education career websites were successful for some school authorities and not effective for others.

SCHOOL LEADERS

Like teacher recruitment actions, **advertising** was one of the least effective strategies for recruitment. School authorities tended to hire leaders within their districts and in some cases very few, if any, external candidates applied.

Considerations for recruitment

Currently, most cited vacancies are in the following subjects:

- French language and immersion,
- High school math and science, and secondary CTS for across multiple studies.

These positions are difficult to fill due to the specific educational background and knowledge required.

- In addition, some school authorities were seeking music teachers, as well as generalist teachers who can teach multiple subjects.

Since 2003, there has been an ongoing need for CTS, math, French immersion and language teachers (see Government of Alberta, 2010a). Other than teacher vacancies, it may also be helpful to consider the context of school authorities.

Considerations for recruitment

- Specific recruitment actions may not have the same effectiveness for all school authorities.
 - “That is, if an authority is looking for teachers with specific knowledge and skills and they are not found through specific job or career fairs, the respondent may not see those particular fairs as effective, yet the same job fairs may be effective for other authorities and/or in other situations.” (Education Workforce Study. p.97)
- Although the considerations discussed had emphasized the impact upon teachers, the impact upon students also needs to be addressed. Students may have reduced access to courses or programs due to the restricted availability of specialized teachers.

Exploring Urbanormativity & Metrocentricity in Pre-Service Teachers: Selected Findings

Purpose of the study

- To gain insight into pre-service teachers' perspectives on rural schools, and the factors that (de)motivate them to pursue rural teaching positions.

Research Questions

- How do pre-service teachers perceive rural schools and communities?
- How do their perceptions drive their decisions to pursue or avoid rural teaching and living?

Methods

Qualitative Survey (Summer & Fall 2025)

- n=130

Focus Groups (July 2025)

- 2 focus groups

Individual Interviews (July–November 2025)

- 5 interviews

Data Analysis & Interpretation

- content analysis of survey data
- thematic analysis using ‘adapted’ place-consciousness framework (Macdonald et al., 2025)

Conceptual Framework (Macdonald et al., 2025)

Levels of place-consciousness:

→ **place-connected**

- ◆ deepest level of **identity with place**
- ◆ one sees their past, present, and future in the place
- ◆ *“it aligns with the way I want to live...I grew up rural”* (interview)

→ **place-willing**

- ◆ rural literacy is developing
- ◆ **desire to learn** more, but haven't had opportunities to do so
- ◆ *“I wish honestly that our curriculum went more into [levels of intersectionality in rural]”* (interview)

→ **place-distorted (place-ignorant)**

- ◆ rural spaces understood at **superficial** level, influenced by stereotypes or caricatures
- ◆ no attempt or desire to make connections to place/people
- ◆ *“a place where you go and teach for 2 years to get permanent contract and come back to the city”* (survey)

Sensitizing Concepts

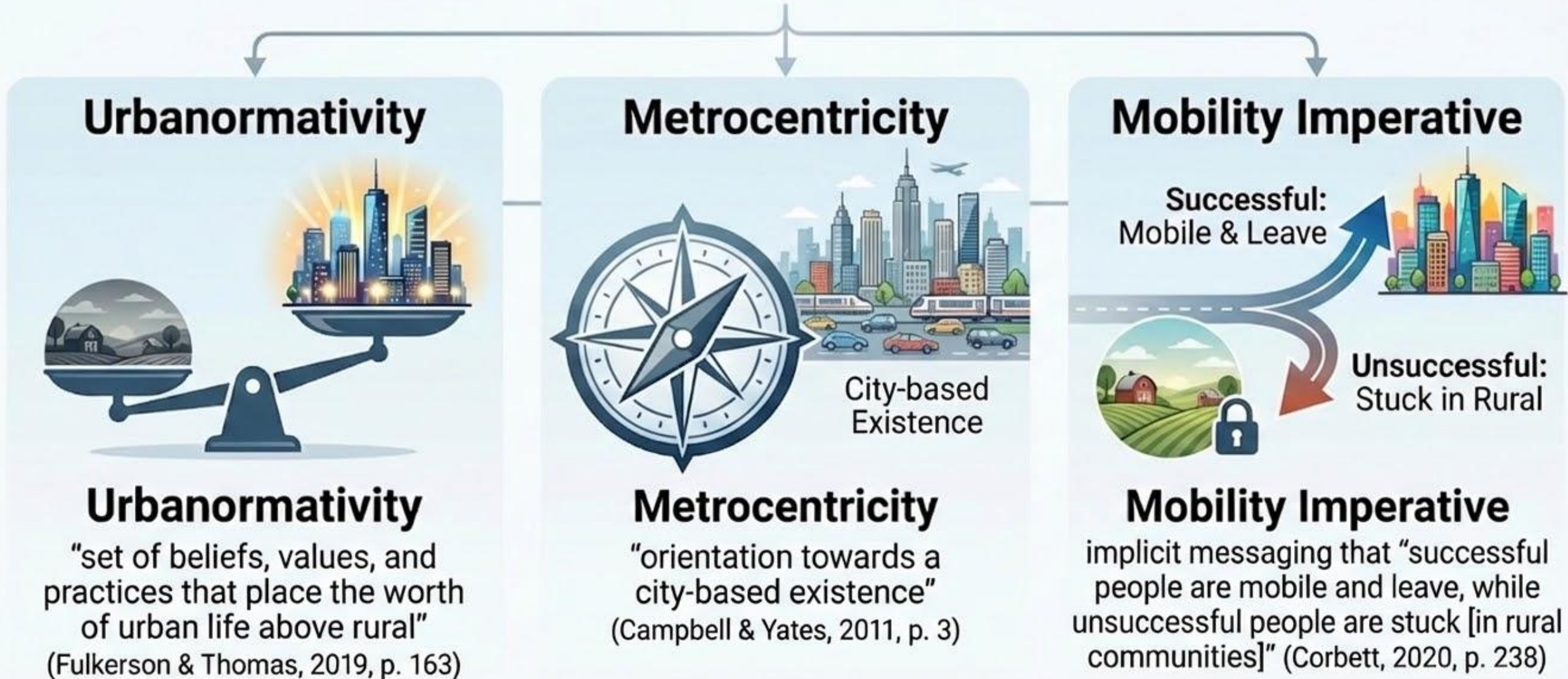


Table Talk



Which of these create the greatest challenge for recruitment and retention?

If these narratives are learned, where do you have influence to interrupt them?

Which, if any, of the following aspects of rural teaching have been covered in your program?

Parent-teacher relationships 54%

Community involvement 39%

Challenges 28%

Rural culture 22.3%

Small v. large classrooms 22.5%

Multigrade classrooms 18.5%

Benefits 11.5%

Negative Stereotypes or Caricatures

“If anything you almost **get a warning** about [rural teaching] where it’s like, ‘**Careful**, these guys are gonna be **less welcoming to equity-seeking groups**’, or like, ‘the parents might be less inclusive so be careful. It’s definitely not, ‘You should meet the needs of rural students.’ It’s more, ‘Careful. Rural parents can be non-progressive.’ (interview)

“The prof just pointed out when you’re in a rural community things are going to be a little bit more, I guess ‘fragile’ is the word. Like usually they’re very tight-knit communities...a lot of them based on Christian values. And so it can be **hard to fit in**. So these were the kind of real-life conversations that we had in class. (interview)

Positive Perceptions/Stereotypes

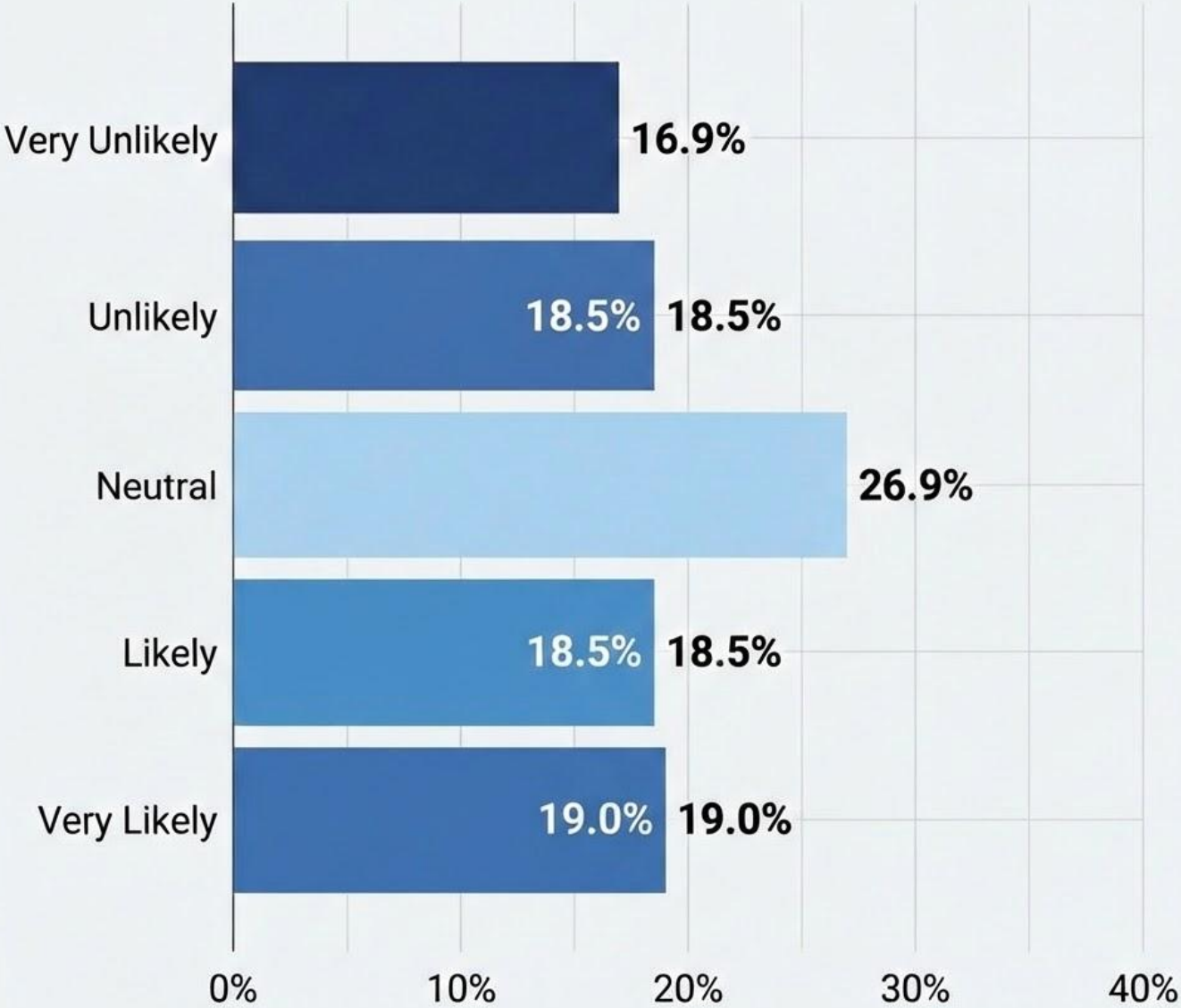
“unique culture, family” (survey)

“real estate is a lot easier to get into” (focus group)

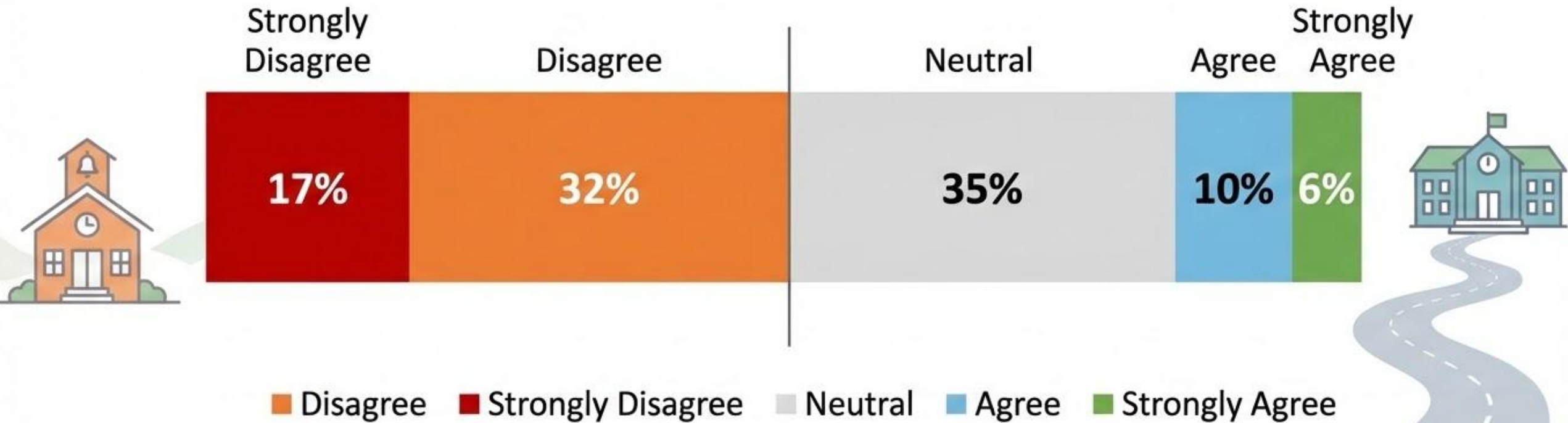
“You feel like you’re part of something” (focus group)

“I feel like there are really, really great resources for more land-based learning in communities that have bigger access to the outdoors” (focus group)

Likelihood of Pursuing Rural Teaching



Does your program prepare you for rural teaching?



Make a List

Based on your experience, list the following factors on one side of a page and the other.

Professional Factors

- a) Attract Teachers: [List professional factors that attract teachers]

- b) Retain Teachers: [List professional factors that retain teachers]

Personal Factors

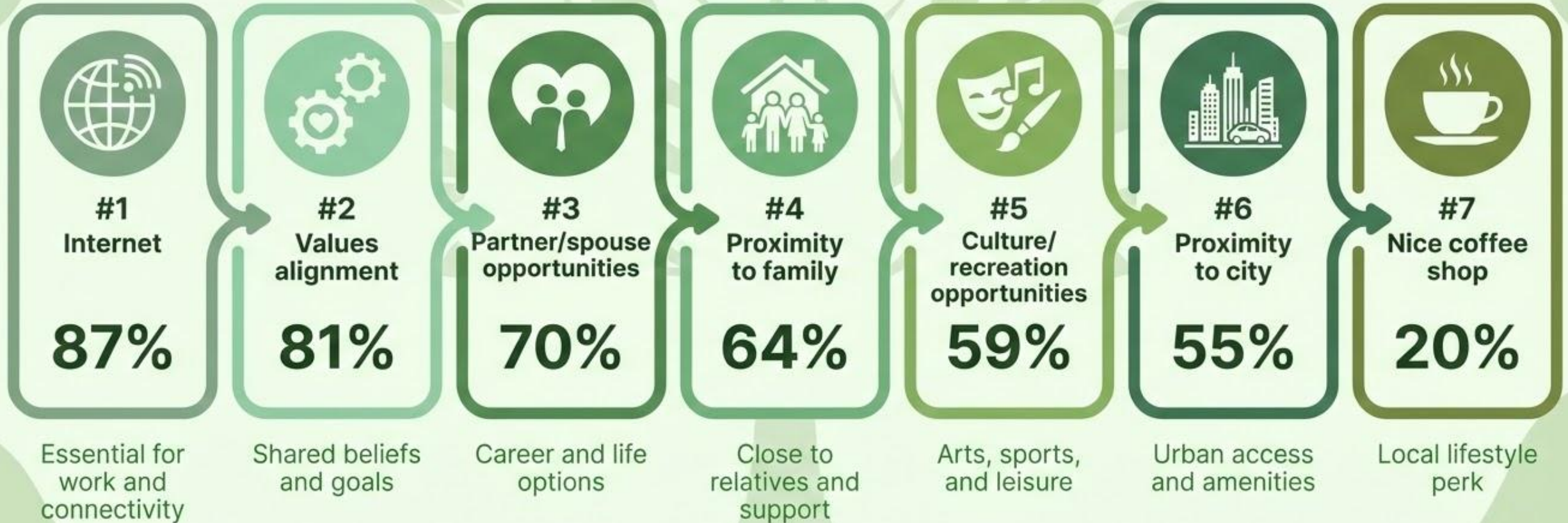
- a) Attract Teachers: [List personal factors that attract teachers]

- b) Retain Teachers: [List personal factors that retain teachers]

Professional Factors



Personal Factors



Reflection



**Do these findings
resonate with you?**

**What are the implications
for action?**

What does the literature say? A theme...

- Rural Sense of **Belonging** (RSOB) (Olsen et al., 2022)
- Why teachers stay—**social** reasons (Seelig & McCabe, 2016)
- Field experiences that integrate **community interactions** (Leonard et al. 2024)
- sense of belonging that **extends into external community** better at developing place-connectedness (Macdonald et al., 2025)

“Over the Hill” (Hudson & Hudson, 2008)

- five-day rural immersion experience (outside of formal practicum)
 - host families
 - teaching and teaching observations
 - community interaction days
 - social evenings
- outcomes:
 - assuaged pre-service teachers’ fears about lack of resources/support
 - positive insight into “social, family, everyday” (p. 72)
 - quashed stereotypes
 - developed sense of connection/realized they’re not “all alone”

References

Campbell, A., & Yates, G. (2011). Want to be a country teacher? No, I am too metrocentric. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 26(4), 1–12.

Corbett, M. (2020). *Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community*. West Virginia University Press.

Fulkerson, G. M., & Thomas, A. R. (2019). *Urbanormativity: Reality, representation, and everyday life*. Lexington Books.

Hudson, P., & Hudson, S. (2008). Changing preservice teachers' attitudes for teaching in rural schools. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(4), 67–77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2008v33n4.6>

Leonard, A. E., Burns, A., Hamilton, E. R., Taylor, L., Tanch, H. (2024). Place as teacher: Community-based experiences, third spaces, & teacher education. *Studying Teacher Education*, 20(2), 214–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2023.2250822>

Macdonald, M-A. Booth, S., Lambert, K., Gray, C., Kessar, T. N., & Beard, T. (2025). Finding their place: How teachers can become part of their rural communities. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 35(1), 1—16. <https://doi.org/10.47381/ajre.v35i1.767>

Olsen, A. W., Fassbender, W., Long, D., & Olsen, K. (2022). Schools, communities, and teachers: How rural sense of belong holds impact for English teachers in place. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 32(2), 108–125.

Seelig, J. L., & McCabe, K. M. (2016). Why teachers stay: Shaping a new narrative on rural teacher education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 31(2), 1–16.

**Thank you for
participating**



**Continuing
Education
Program**



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents