

***SPECIAL REPORT:***

By Jaclyn Zubrzycki

# **THE TEACHER CRISIS IN RURAL COLORADO**

Cash-strapped small districts that serve 130,000 students struggle to attract and retain educators amid a shrinking pool of candidates





**W**hen Meggan Roper describes the old mining town of New Castle to people who have never visited the Western Slope, she mentions the beautiful mountains and access to camping and hiking.

**SHE ALSO TELLS THEM ABOUT THE STOPLIGHT IN HER HOMETOWN:** “There’s just one, and it’s flashing yellow. That gives you some idea.”

Now a UNC senior studying elementary education, Roper hopes to return to New Castle as a student teacher next fall. Roper has fond memories of experiencing the highs and lows of teaching for the first time while shadowing a teacher in the district. “I know these people, they were my community, and I want to get back to them,” she says.

But even for someone raised in a small town, there are things to consider before moving to a rural area to teach. Money, for one. Roper will need to pay tuition for her student teaching while living in an area where rent isn't cheap, and even full-time teacher salaries can start under \$35,000 a year. Roper also wants to meet people — other than tourists — with whom she didn't grow up. "I have concerns about going back and living there year-round," she says.

Roper isn't alone in her reservations. Remote locations and lower salaries make it difficult to recruit and retain teachers in many rural areas. And in the last five years, fewer young people are studying education at all. That's combined to create a serious teacher shortage in rural Colorado.

"Colorado is not unique" in experiencing a teacher shortage, says Harvey Rude, a professor emeritus at UNC whose career has included studying special education and working with Navajo students. But the teacher shortage in rural areas here has reached what he described as "crisis proportions." It's hard to find applicants, and harder to find applicants who are qualified for the particular position you need, especially if that position is science, math, special education or a world language.

Rude says UNC's new Colorado Center for Rural Education will help prepare educators like Roper for the unique experiences of rural schools and support them once they're there. Still, advocates say recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas is an ongoing challenge — and one that's not likely to be resolved without financial support.

## NOT JUST A RURAL CHALLENGE

The number of public school students in Colorado has been steadily increasing for decades, while the number of new trained teachers has been moving in the opposite direction. Colorado institutes of higher education produce just half the teachers the state needs each year; many districts "import" teachers from other states.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education's assessment, in a 2016 report (see graph below), lines up with Rude's. This all amounts to a looming crisis, especially in rural Colorado.

Eugene Sheehan, the dean of UNC's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, says the overall teacher shortage is the result of a number of factors. One is the improved economy, which means people with college degrees can access more lucrative professions. Another is what he describes as a shift in society's perceptions about the teaching profession. Still another is the increased stress placed on teachers by new accountability systems and changing curricula. There are also changing expectations about how long anyone stays in any job. "The teacher shortage is affected by all of these societal things," Sheehan says.

Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has been falling around the country. But not every state, or district, has a shortage. States like Michigan and Pennsylvania produce more teachers than they need; school districts like Boulder Valley in Colorado have no problem recruiting teachers.

Colorado was ranked as having one of the lowest "teacher attractiveness" ratings in the country by the Learning Policy Institute, a nonprofit focused on education research, policy and practice. The institute ranked Colorado's wages, working conditions and percentage of experienced teachers at well below the national average; the state is also more likely to have inexperienced teachers working with minority or low-income students than other states.

In rural Colorado, salaries are even lower than in the state as a whole. "We're concerned about rural districts' abilities to attract professionally prepared and high-quality teachers," says Kerrie Dahlman, the president of the Colorado Education Association.

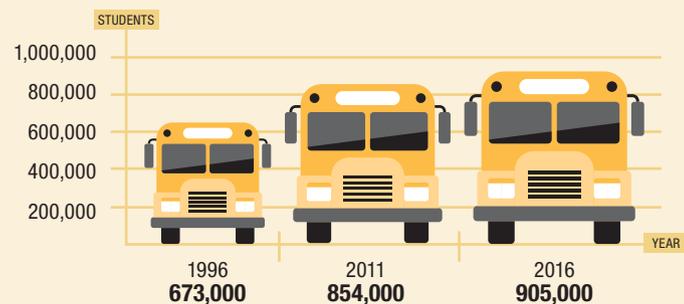
While most Colorado students attend the state's large districts in the Front Range, 147 of the state's 178 districts are classified as "rural" or "small rural" by the state's education departments based on their distance from urban centers and their enrollment. Some 130,000 students attend rural school districts.

"We're by far the majority of districts," says Michelle Murphy, the executive director of the Colorado Rural Schools Alliance. But, she says, it's easy for rural issues to fly under the radar. The state's accountability system, for instance, was designed with bigger urban districts in mind.

## COLORADO SHORTAGE SNAPSHOT

### RISING STUDENT POPULATIONS

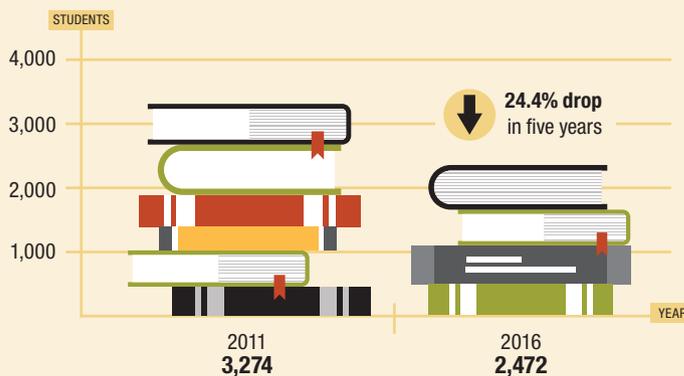
Total Number of Public School Students



Colorado Department of Higher Education

### FEWER TEACHERS

Students Admitted to Colorado Teacher Preparation Program



Colorado Department of Higher Education

**“WE’RE CONCERNED ABOUT RURAL DISTRICTS’ ABILITIES TO ATTRACT PROFESSIONALLY PREPARED AND HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS.”**

–Kerrie Dahlman, president, Colorado Education Association

**LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS**

More people are beginning to look for ways to recruit and retain more teachers in rural Colorado. In late 2016, UNC received a \$2.2 million grant to work with rural districts on addressing these issues, supported by new state funding. That led to the creation of the Rural Education Center.

The school has had a center for urban education for more than 15 years; the new center represents “a firm commitment that there needs to be something more substantial for rural communities,” Rude says.

The project includes the “Rural Teaching Scholars” program, which provides a \$2,800 stipend for those who student teach who would consider student teaching in rural school districts; a teacher-cadet program for high schoolers interested in teaching; a Rural Teacher Leaders program that will, among other things, support and encourage rural teachers to get National Board Certification; and more professional development networks for rural teachers.

The Rural Teaching Scholars has awarded 22 stipends so far to students to teach at rural schools around the state. Meggan Roper is one of dozens of students who has applied for its second round.

**ALL ABOUT THE MONEY**

Rural Colorado isn’t homogenous. There are quiet towns on the Eastern Plains with growing numbers of students who are learning English for the first time, well-off tourist hubs in the mountains, schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education on reservations.

But the Rural Schools Alliance’s Murphy says that within that diversity, there’s at least one shared challenge: money. “The idea that anything short of more money to pay our teachers is going to solve the problem is lunacy,” she says. In some districts, teachers might be making just \$28,000 a year. At the same time, the cost of living is often higher than along the Front Range.

She says that districts aren’t opting to spend money on things other than salaries. “It’s not like we’re not choosing to pay them so little; there’s no wiggle room.”

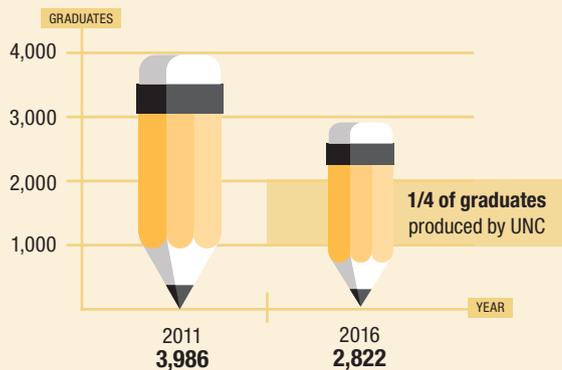
Frank Reeves was the superintendent in the 175-student district Genoa-Hugo School District in eastern Colorado. Now he’s the superintendent of the East Grand School District, in the mountains just west of Boulder.

Reeves says that at Genoa-Hugo, in a more remote and agricultural area, he’d post jobs and not get a single application. The distance from Denver, and the prospect of joining a community without many young people, made it hard to recruit. He says it’s particularly hard for those who are single.

In Granby, near a number of ski resorts, he says, “it’s not recruitment, it’s retention.” His district offers a four-day school week and

**UNC TEACHER PROGRAM GRADUATES**

Even as fewer students enroll in teacher education, UNC produces nearly one quarter of Colorado’s education graduates



**RECRUIT, RETAIN TEACHERS IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

The Colorado Department of Higher Education awarded UNC a \$2.2 million grant that will be used over the next five years to help address teacher shortages in Colorado’s 147 rural school districts, especially in the high-need areas of science, mathematics, special education and cultural/linguistic diversity.

The grant establishes the Center for Rural Education, which will be led by faculty from UNC’s School of Teacher Education and School of Special Education.

**THE CENTER WILL:**

- Develop or expand teacher cadet academies that encourage rural middle and high school students to consider teaching as a career
- Provide financial incentives for teacher candidates in pre-service teacher preparation programs who commit to student teach or teach in rural Colorado school districts
- Provide mentoring and professional development support for beginning teachers in rural districts
- Supply stipends to rural teachers who commit to obtain concurrent enrollment certification or national board teaching certification

some free skiing for teachers. But he says that the cost of living is so high that it's hard to keep teachers for long. He recently offered two teachers jobs with salaries around \$35,000 a year; both had master's degrees. The cheapest rent in Granby is \$1,000 a month.

"Kids should have the same opportunities to gain the education they need to be successful in life," he says. "If a school can't hire or keep a math teacher, because of its size or because of the amount of money it has, then that kid is at a disadvantage."

"There's not a level playing field and you don't know how to create it. But it'd go a long way if you could offer a salary that even looked competitive with the Front Range."

Some areas, including Aspen, have raised local taxes, but in other cases proposed mill levy increases to raise salaries at the local level have failed. Murphy argues that a more comprehensive solution needs to come from the state.

In the meantime, some school districts have gotten creative. In Eagle County, the district has considered building tiny houses for teachers. In Grand County, Reeves has wondered if there's a way to somehow take advantage of vacation houses that sit vacant for much of the year. Students in the Custer County district are in the midst of building

four new apartments for teachers in the town of Westcliffe.

The district has also begun to modernize its recruitment. Mark Payler, the district's superintendent, introduced online recruiting (to replace paper applications) just last year. He pitches potential applicants on the flexibility and autonomy possible in a small district, on the ability to make a difference, and on Custer County's wonderful views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Other educational organizations have also tried to tackle the issue. Colorado State University-Pueblo has an effort to bring more new teachers to rural Colorado; another university offers field trips to rural districts; a separate effort through the Northwest BOCES (a collaborative of rural districts) asks students to teach for a few years in the rural northeast in exchange for a guarantee that they can eventually end up in the Boulder Valley School District (There haven't been any takers on that one yet.)

"I think the efforts and incentives are all important," says the Rural Schools Alliance's Murphy. "I'd feel embraced by a community that built me a home." But, she says, that won't make a difference "if we don't get our salaries up to par with other jobs for kids coming out of school with degrees and debt."

## RETURNING HOME

While the financial and social challenges in rural Colorado are real, Sheehan says it's important not to forget about or ignore the reasons people go into teaching in the first place. It can be a profoundly satisfying, rewarding and independent career. Of the nation's many school kids and teachers, he says, "most go home every day feeling good about themselves."

"You're seeing progress, you're seeing kids have an experience—there's an immediate reinforcement that people don't talk about, that you can only experience," he says.

That's what drew Roper to teaching. A first-generation college student, she's had people tell her teaching will be hard, or that she won't make much money. "I'm passionate about learning," she says.

When she was a young person in a rural district, she says, "some teachers would be there for a year, or not even a full year, and a lot of times it was by their choice." She recalls one teacher moving to the Front Range.

But other teachers stuck around for the long haul, and those relationships were invaluable. "They knew who you were, they knew how to push you and help you succeed," she says. "It was kind of fantastic." **UNC**

## ENCOURAGING POTENTIAL

Nearly 400 high school students attended a UNC conference for future teachers Feb. 24 — an increase of nearly 350 students since the annual event began just two years ago.

The conference offers the opportunity for students to learn more about teaching in specific areas, including early childhood and secondary education, special education, urban education and educational psychology. Sessions were led by UNC faculty and current K-12 teachers in the region.

The high schoolers, many of whom are already teaching in classrooms as part of their high school's teacher cadet program, represented 70 high schools throughout Colorado. UNC works closely with teacher cadet programs and provides professional support.

The conference is just one of the ways UNC, the state's leader in preparing educators, is responding to support prospective and current teachers. UNC has also spearheaded an Early Career Network, with members composed of college teacher candidates and teachers with one to five years of experience throughout the region.

"We know that new teachers and teacher candidates persist when they feel a sense of belonging," says Suzette Youngs, co-organizer with Chris Kyser and Linda Leon, of the Future Teacher Conference and the



Early Career Network. "The goal is to bring groups of aspiring and current teachers together, creating a bridge from high school through college to the first years of teaching. The first years are a critical time in teaching and we hope our conference and network provides the support teachers need to succeed."