

**A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF TEACHER RETENTION IN A  
RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL**

A Dissertation by

Scott A. Friesen

Master of Education, Wichita State University, 2000

Bachelor of Science, Bethel College, 1991

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RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL**

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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Jean A. Patterson, Committee Chair

---

Eric Freeman, Committee Member

---

Clay Stoldt, Committee Member

---

John Fast, Committee Member

---

Susan Bray, Committee Member

Accepted for the College of Education

---

Shirley Lefever-Davis, Dean

Accepted for the Graduate School

---

Dennis Livesay, Dean

## **DEDICATION**

To my wife Peggy, my sons Jason, Justin, Jordan,  
and my Mom and Dad for their support and encouragement.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of people who have worked with me to help complete this journey. I think back to my Master's degree in 2000, when I was introduced to the faculty at Wichita State University. I really appreciated the opportunity to grow as a professional through the instruction of the faculty. Dr. Randy Turk was the individual that I worked with the most during my Master's program and he was someone that challenged me to be a better administrator and to always "document, document, document".

A few years later, I completed my district-level certification and then made the decision to enroll in the doctorate program at WSU. I have made many friends and connections with educators throughout the state of Kansas as a result of being in this program. I have also had the pleasure of working with many outstanding WSU faculty members. Both of my field study experiences in the doctorate program were under the leadership of Dr. Ray Calabrese. Dr. Calabrese was a unique individual that increased my ability to look at things differently. I enjoyed my time with Dr. Calabrese and was planning on him being my advisor as I completed my dissertation. When he left to take a position at The Ohio State University, I was unsure what I was going to do. This transition became a situation that I found challenging to deal with. I stepped Dr. Jean Patterson to be my advisor. I have really appreciated her willingness to help me. I understood that it presented challenges to her also. Dr. Patterson is a top-notch person and educator. Her insight and ability to lead is an asset to WUS and the students that she works with. She has shown an abundance of patience as she has helped me complete my dissertation. Her never-ending support has helped me with this project that has taken me many years to complete. Jean, Thank You! I could not have done this without your guidance, knowledge, and support.

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to define and understand from a teacher's perspective, the factors that keep them teaching in small rural schools. A qualitative case study research design was used within the framework of an appreciative inquiry theoretical perspective. The study was also viewed through the lens of rural community culture. The research involved teachers from Stanton High School. This study strived to look at the reasons why the teachers remained in their profession and also to describe an environment that would keep them at SHS throughout their career. This study defined factors of why teachers remained at SHS including geographic location, community, family benefits, peer teachers, and job satisfaction. The implications from this study focused on school/community relationships, student/teacher relationships, extra-curricular activities, administrative support, and geography in relation to teacher retention.

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## CHAPTER 1

In 2001, the federal government implemented The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which required public schools to examine the way they educate students. The law set a benchmark that all students would be 100% proficient in reading and math by the year 2014. However, because most states were falling far short of the goal, the United States Department of Education allowed states to apply for a waiver from NCLB's requirements. In July, 2012, Kansas was approved for such a waiver (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). Instead, new student accountability measures were put in place beginning with the 2014-15 school year.

Regardless of the accountability requirements, most states have adopted curriculum standards, with many in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards. When school districts require teachers to teach to a standardized curriculum, they can lose their ability to create learning opportunities that are tailored to the situation (Thatchenkery, 1999). This frustrates teachers and takes away learning opportunities for students. Additionally, teachers faced pressure trying to meet the testing requirements of NCLB. The goal was for all students to be proficient in reading and math by the year 2014 ("NCLB Act," 2002). This reinforced a belief the public school system has responsibility in dealing with achievement gaps between students of various socio-economic groups (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006).

NCLB required school districts to verify that teachers in the classroom are highly qualified ("NCLB Act," 2002). This requirement did not change with the waiver to NCLB that the state of Kansas was given. Highly qualified refers to teachers who have (a) a bachelors degree, (b) full state certification or licensure, and (c) prove they know each subject they teach (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). This added qualification has made an already difficult job of hiring and retaining teachers more challenging for administrators and school districts.

Some states struggled to retain teachers before NCLB. For example, in Texas, between 1987 and 1996, approximately 16% of new teachers left the school system and 26% of them left within the first 2 years (Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999). Nationwide estimates in the early 1990's showed that approximately 30% of new teachers do not stay teaching into their 3<sup>rd</sup> year and 40% leave the teaching profession within the first 5 years (Odell & Ferraro, 1992). Lowering these percentages by any number would benefit school districts.

The problem of keeping teachers in the education profession has not gotten better in the new millennium. Teacher attrition is the greatest in rural and urban areas and ranges from 20% to 50% of new teachers leaving the education profession in their first three years (Bradley & Loadman, 2005). After the first three years, the number of teachers leaving the profession increases. Up to 46% of new teachers get out of teaching by the end of their fifth year (Cochran-Smith, 2004). These statistics should cause school districts to focus on the retention of their highly qualified teachers. This situation is not much different in the state of Kansas, where teacher attrition and overall shortage of qualified teachers in some core subjects is an ongoing challenge. A study conducted from 1999 to 2005 by Kansas United School Administrators (USA), showed that 9% of all teachers in Kansas leave the profession each year. During the years of the study, there was a range of 116 to 270 teaching spots left vacant each year (United School Administrators, 2008).

To lower the number of vacancies, in 2003 the state of Kansas developed an alternative program for people interested in getting into the teaching profession at the secondary school level. In order to qualify for this program, the prospective teacher must meet the following requirements: (a) have a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, (b) the degree must be in an area that is certified for secondary education, and (c) all coursework for the bachelor's

degree must have a minimum of a 2.5 GPA (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008). The program has been successful in adding to the number of teachers in the state. Between 2003 and 2008, 10,000 teaching licenses were issued to Kansas graduates. The program resulted in an additional 570 restricted licenses (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008). In Kansas, a restricted teaching license allows individuals enrolled in an alternative program to teach middle and high school students in high need subjects, such as math and science, while they are working on completing their course requirements.

### **Research Problem**

The demands on teachers continue to increase as society and regulatory agencies try to maintain a high level of learning for all students. The NCLB mandate developed during the Bush administration put a focus on achieving high scores on reading and math tests. According to NCLB, all students were expected to be proficient in reading and math by 2014. To accomplish this mandate, school districts directed parts of their budget to improving curriculum, which they hoped would lead to higher test scores.

While curriculum is an important part of improving education, it does not address an even more important need for the education system, which is retaining quality teachers. The research shows that an important factor in determining whether or not students learn in school and reach high academic standards is the classroom teacher (Berry, 2004). For that reason, schools face difficult decisions when they have teaching openings they cannot fill. Consequently, many school systems have lowered their qualification standards when hiring teachers, which then leads to under qualified teachers and eventually lower academic performance (Ingersoll, 2002). Along with the academic success of students, there are other organizational systems within schools affected by teacher retention. The consistency and stability provided by teachers

with long tenures allows school districts to implement school improvement policies that can be a key factor in the overall success of a school over time (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Teacher retention, therefore, is a problem facing schools and is a perennial challenge that school administrators face. With the large number of teachers needed to staff schools, this makes the problem even more noticeable and more challenging to deal with, as teachers represent 4% of the civilian work force (Ingersoll, 2002). The highest rates of attrition in the teaching profession occur in the first years of teaching (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). Geographic isolation, poor compensation, and job dissatisfaction are all factors that contribute to teacher attrition, particularly in rural educational settings.

There are varying definitions to determine what constitutes rural schools and rural areas. Schools that have fewer than 300 students, are of some distance from any major city, and are in a community of fewer than 2,500 people are considered rural (Harris, 2001). The United States Department of Labor defines rural areas as being in a remote location and providing low salaries (Neill, 2006). There are approximately 5,000 rural school districts, which make up almost one third of all districts in the United States (Neill, 2006).

Although the research identifies challenges of teacher retention in general, and rural schools in particular, there are situations where highly qualified teachers have remained on staff in small, rural districts for many years. Advantages that rural schools have over urban schools are smaller class sizes, more personal relationships, and a higher level of input in the process of decision-making (Malloy, 2007). Finding the reasons veteran teachers remain in their school might provide small rural districts with information to help increase teacher retention.

For this study, veteran teachers were identified as those who have attained tenure in the state of Kansas. Tenure is defined as teachers who have completed their third year of teaching in

a school district and have been offered a contract for their fourth year or teachers who have received tenure in a previous district and have completed their second year in their current district and have been offered a contract for a third year (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008). I used an appreciative inquiry perspective combined with rural community culture in order to understand why highly qualified veteran secondary teachers at a rural high school remain teaching when so many others either leave the profession or move to larger cities and towns.

### **Theoretical Framework: Rural Community Culture and Appreciative Inquiry**

Theories of rural community culture and appreciative inquiry were used as the lenses for examining why highly qualified veteran teachers remain teaching in small rural schools. These teachers could look to find positions with districts in larger towns and cities that offer higher pay and more amenities, yet they chose to stay in rural schools. Appreciative inquiry and rural community culture focus on the unique and positive aspects of rural schools and communities and what makes them attractive to highly qualified teachers.

### **Rural Community Culture**

Each rural community has a distinctive culture, and understanding the culture might provide a possible explanation for the retention of veteran teachers. Analysis of a rural community's culture revealed some positive elements that helped both the community and school to thrive, and to keep its highly qualified teachers. Rural communities have values and norms that may differ from urban areas. There is a need for a strong relationship between a rural community and its school. In rural communities, the school is a source of pride and a gathering place for social events, which promotes a bond between school personnel and community members who agree the existence and success of the community depends on the school (Barley &

Beesley, 2007). Community values, norms, and attitudes are strengthened by the network of relationships and deep roots in the community that rural families have (Bauch, 2001). Teachers are more likely to stay at a school when they feel connected to the community. Teachers who leave their job do not feel that the place they teach is their home, while teachers that stay in their positions have a feeling of rootedness in the community (McClure & Reeves, 2004). This feeling of being accepted in the community may entice a teacher to stay in a rural setting, which can enhance the school and the community. Teacher retention can help strengthen relationships between teachers and students which provides continuity in curriculum development and school improvement (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Community members and local businesses play multiple roles in rural communities and schools. Community members fill such roles as bus drivers, cooks, teachers, volunteer activity drivers, and extracurricular sponsors while local businesses provide fundraising assistance (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Depending on how small the community is, the school may be the largest local employer. The school and community depend on each other for their survival. This creates a definite interest throughout the community in the education of its students. Many students in rural schools participate in extra-curricular activities, which also increases parent and community involvement in the school. This helps to increase the knowledge of community members about school events and also provides support from the community toward the school. It also provides an avenue for communication between the community and school.

Another benefit of living in a rural community is the cost of living is often less than urban areas; providing teachers with less expense. Small class sizes can also help to retain teachers in rural or small schools (Monk, 2007). These smaller classes also can promote a positive learning atmosphere. Small schools have a tendency to promote a school climate that is

positive, has an elevated level of faculty-student engagement, and with enhanced relationships between the community and school (Bauch, 2001).

A rural community's culture can have a direct influence on the school system in small districts. The impact can be related to items such as communication, change, and interdependence between the school and community. Communication is a key tool to achieving success in any organization. Although rural communities and schools are small and often concentrated geographically, they do not always have effective ways to communicate, which can have a negative effect on the relationship between the community and the school system (Winand & Edlefson, 2008). Without a good system for communicating with each other, rural schools and communities can face other obstacles such as making changes when needed. Rural schools districts and their administrators have faced community resistance to change over time (Lamkin, 2006). It is important for rural schools and their communities to work together to survive and to achieve success.

There is interdependence between rural communities and schools in that when one of them is doing well, the other is also thriving (Winand & Edlefson, 2008). Developing a partnership between the school and community is necessary for both to be successful. The partners must display caring and mutual trust and allow both parties to be involved in decisions involving school and community goals (Bauch, 2001). Understanding the needs of the community can increase the ownership that students feel about where they live. The more understanding a student has about the history, economy, and social structure of their community, the more invested they become in that specific community (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Appreciative inquiry also offers a complementary framework for identifying and understanding



the positive aspects of rural community culture that contribute to the retention of highly qualified teachers.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry (AI) focuses on the positive events taking place within an organization. It works to build on the number of positive experiences by recognizing them and trying to create more of them. AI can be viewed through a theoretical perspective of action research. As a constructive approach to action research, AI can help to develop change in organizations by promoting positive conversations (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001). Creating more positive experiences can also have the effect of limiting negative experiences. One way this can be accomplished is by increasing communication within an organization. Many times organizations take the approach of trying to define problems and make improvements by taking a problem-solving approach. Through investigation of the good things that are happening, organizations are able to problem solve by looking at positive actions instead of negative ones. As people within an organization look into their strengths and weaknesses, they are able to gain knowledge about what is wrong and may become better problem-solvers, but they do not improve their ability to dream and build a better future (Ludema et al., 2001). AI strives to find the best of what has happened in an organization and repeat those moments.

AI is based on the thought that an organization will move in the direction of what is being studied. If what is being talked about are peak experiences, accomplishments, high achievements and best practices, these areas will increase (Ludema et al., 2001). Oftentimes meetings involving employees are focused on checklist type conversations. These can range from scheduling daily activities to a list of expectations that need be addressed. These surface-level conversations help an organization to survive its day-to-day responsibilities, but seldom help

move the group forward. AI allows people to tell others about their peak experiences within an organization which can help a group become comfortable in discussing their deeply and firmly held desires and goals (Bushe, 1998).

AI as a research perspective is intended to discover, understand, and promote changes involving processes and arrangements within an organization (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Using AI as part of research requires the selection of a positive topic since the direction that an organization moves in, is directly related to what is studied (Ludema et al., 2001). Conducting research on education and specifically the teaching profession, I am choosing to focus on why teachers stay in the profession (retention) instead of why they leave (attrition). Teachers involved in this study had the opportunity to share what they like about their jobs and why they chose to stay in the teaching profession in a rural school and community. AI helped me acquire this information, as I asked positive questions to bring out stories, dreams, metaphors, and highlights of their experience that are not always part of organizational conversations (Ludema et al., 2001).

Action research provides participants with the opportunity to share knowledge through focus groups, interviews, and small group discussions. The design of action research provides an outline without limiting the creativity produced by individuals. AI studies are conducted by communicating with other stakeholders within an organization. AI requires research participants to interact with each other as they construct ideas about positive change. Through these interactions, participants share knowledge and assumptions based on their experiences. One's theoretical perspective is a result of the assumptions that a researcher brings to a study and how those assumptions are stated (Crotty, 1998). Appreciative Inquiry uses five principles to consider

for analyzing the data from this study; the a) constructionist principle, b) simultaneity principle, c) poetic principle, d) anticipatory principle, e) positive principle.

The constructionist view states that through conversations with each other, we can create an organizational world, which we can then experience as real and normal (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The simultaneity principle states that change and inquiry are not separate items, but rather happen simultaneously (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). The poetic principle suggests that organizations are evolving networks that can be open-ended and can be created and then changed through human intervention (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The anticipatory principle uses the focus on what could be in the future to drive change in the current system (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The positive principle states that using positive conversations and questioning can promote successful and long-lasting change (Cooperrider et al., 2003). These five principles will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

### **Objectives/Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of veteran teachers in a small rural district by identifying their core experiences for remaining in teaching and identifying their beliefs for a teaching environment that would help them to remain in teaching throughout their career. The information gathered from this study might provide information to school administrators in rural districts that might assist them with increasing teacher retention. The study had the following research objectives:

1. To describe rural high school teachers' positive core experiences for remaining in teaching.
2. To describe rural high school teachers' dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching throughout their career.

## **Research Questions**

The following overarching question guided my study: How can rural school districts retain qualified educators in public school (pk-12) education? These research questions guided the study.

1. How do highly qualified veteran, rural, secondary school teachers describe their positive core experiences for remaining in teaching?
2. How do highly qualified veteran, rural, secondary school teachers describe their dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching throughout their career?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

Chapter 2 is comprised of a synthesis of the reviewed research as it relates to teacher retention. Topics addressed in this review are teacher retention, school demographics and teacher retention, rural district issues with retention, professional benefits that promote retention, and strategies to improve retention.

#### **Search Criteria for Empirical Literature**

The purpose of this section is to synthesize empirical research relevant to my study regarding teacher retention. My strategy in finding empirical research for my study was based on the following questions:

1. What empirical research has been conducted that relates to the types of schools that retain teachers?
2. What environments in schools promote teacher retention?
3. How can schools increase their teacher retention rates?

The following criteria had to be met to be considered for this study:

1. Empirical research conducted since 1990.
2. Empirical research that used teachers as the unit of analysis.

I found research pertaining to teacher retention in schools and more specifically, secondary schools, but found limited research pertaining to teacher retention of highly qualified tenured teachers. In the following section I will provide a synthesis of the themes I found in the research.

## Synthesis of Empirical Research

In this section, I discuss my synthesis of the empirical research related to teacher retention. First, I describe teacher retention, then discuss the need for teacher retention followed by the relationship that school demographics have on teacher retention. Next, I describe teaching environments that promote teacher retention based on the research. I close this section by presenting how the research describes strategies to improve teacher retention as well as the unique issues rural districts have with teacher retention.

### Teacher Retention

Defining teacher retention within the education profession is challenging due to factors involved with teachers leaving the profession entirely or staying in, but changing districts. Studies involving teacher retention differentiate between *attrition*, which is completely leaving the teaching profession, and *migration*, which is movement from one school to a different one (Harris, 2001). The attrition rate for new teachers is high. Almost 30% of teachers starting out in the profession leave within their first five years (Berry & Darling-Hammond, 2006). However, just because a teacher leaves a school does not mean he or she is leaving the education profession altogether. Many teachers leave one district to go to another they perceive as more desirable. Some teachers move to a school where they can have more help with curriculum, better teaching assignments, more support from administration and colleagues, and more positive interactions with parents (Berry, Hirsch, & Hoke, 2004). Moving from school to school accounts for about half the teacher turnover in the U.S. (Ingersoll, 2002).

Factors affecting teacher attrition include challenging working conditions, relationships with students, relationships with building administrators, and teachers' education background. Each of these is discussed below.

Challenging working conditions provide reasons for teachers to leave the profession. A study conducted in the northwest United States showed that lack of respect for the teaching profession, student behavior problems, emotional aspects of the job, and poor working conditions provided the highest rankings as to why teachers left the education profession (Ouyang & Paprock, 2006). Schools with fewer student conduct problems have lower teacher attrition. In addition, when teachers are given more input on decisions involving student behavior policies, there is less conflict between students and staff, which results in greater teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2002).

Building relationships with students plays an important role in teacher retention. Teachers who do not develop a relationship with their students face a greater chance of being dissatisfied with their job. Thus, building relationships with students can lead teachers to a higher level of job satisfaction. These relationships can include current and former students who stay in touch with them helping to develop interpersonal relationships, which are a main factor in a teacher's job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001).

Another factor affecting teacher job satisfaction and retention is building leadership. Data provided by the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality showed that schools with effective, strong leadership attracted quality teachers (Berry, 2004). Lack of input on school decisions and inadequate support from school administration were examples of the effect that leadership has had on teacher attrition (R. M. Ingersoll, 2001).

The building principal plays an integral part in managing and keeping quality teachers (Williams & Kritsonis, 2007). Teachers who do not receive support from administration are more likely to fail and look for a different job (Berry & Darling-Hammond, 2006). Administrators can help increase retention by making an effort to communicate more effectively

with teachers. Teachers reported greater job satisfaction when they identify their principal as someone who promotes open lines of communication with his or her staff, delegates authority, and shares important information on a regular basis (Bogler, 2001).

Principals can improve communication and the quality of teaching while at the same time promote teacher retention by using their veteran teachers in a mentoring program for new teachers. Leadership from building principals who implement a mentoring program involving common planning time and collaboration for new teachers greatly lowers the chance of a teacher leaving after their first year (Berry, 2004). Building level administrators can improve job satisfaction with a focus on improving teacher working conditions they have control over. Although principals do not have much control over the amount of money teachers earn, they can work to eliminate other forms of dissatisfaction that lead to teacher attrition (Kaplan & Owings, 2002). Many schools focus only on teacher concerns when trying to decrease teacher attrition instead of looking at ways to strengthen the skills of their administrators. If school districts focused on providing training for administrators in problem-solving and motivational strategies there might be higher teacher retention in schools (Williams & Kritsonis, 2007).

Teachers want to be involved not only in decisions within their classrooms but also in school-wide decisions. When teachers have little involvement in decision-making, they can have a low level of job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). This is especially important for new teachers in a building. Getting new staff members involved in identifying and addressing issues that have an impact on student learning and job satisfaction are important factors in increasing teacher retention (Kaplan & Owings, 2002). Teacher involvement with a variety of aspects within the school can help strengthen their desire to continue to be a part of the education profession. Teachers are likely to be more satisfied and stay in the education profession if they are in



buildings where they have an influence on school policy, control of decisions affecting their own classes, quality principals, and a system for mentoring in the first years of teaching (Stockard & Lehman, 2004).

Involving teachers in the hiring process can also have a positive impact on teacher retention. Administrators can promote better relationships and teacher retention among staff members, especially veteran teachers, by incorporating them in some way into the hiring process. Administrators who allow teachers to have input in the hiring of new staff, end up hiring teachers who get along and work together well which translates into higher teacher retention (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

The education background and academic ability of the teacher can also be a factor in determining rates of teacher retention. Teachers with higher ACT scores are more likely to leave teaching. This factor was even stronger for teachers in the areas of math and science (Podgursky, Monroe, & Watson, 2004). A study of 11,000 college students found that those who graduated and went into teaching and scored in the top quartile on their college entrance exam were twice as likely to leave the teaching profession as those who scored in the bottom quartile. The study determined the main reasons these teachers left the profession were to find a career outside of education or they did not like teaching and were dissatisfied with their jobs (Henke, Chen, Geis, & Knepper, 2000).

Advanced education degrees can also have an effect on the retention rate of teachers. Teachers who enter the profession with an advanced degree have higher attrition rates than individuals with a bachelor's degree (Kirby et al., 1999). Many states have developed an alternative certification program which allows college graduates to postpone formal teacher education and start teaching immediately (Ingersoll, 2002). This option is popular when

economic times are difficult, but as the economy improves, many of these individuals choose to leave the teaching profession to go back to other jobs. For some in this group, teaching is often a backup when layoffs occur or jobs are not available in their profession.

### **Rural District Issues with Retention**

Urban, suburban, and rural schools all face challenges with teacher retention, but schools located in highly urban and remote rural areas find it more difficult to retain highly qualified teachers than suburban areas (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Because this study focused on teacher retention in rural school districts, this portion of the review of research primarily emphasizes studies conducted with rural populations.

Rural schools face challenges in retaining teachers that are difficult to remedy. Rural areas tend to have a slower pace of life than urban areas (R. Ingersoll, 2001). Based on that, it is easy to assume it would be the same for educators teaching in a rural school district. The complete opposite, however, might be true for teachers in small, rural schools. The pace of life is usually slower in rural places than in cities but educators may find that life in rural districts is sped up because they may be required to teach more subjects, be involved in supervising more extracurricular activities, and not have as many other staff to support them (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Not only do these teachers have to work on getting certified in multiple areas, they also have to prepare for more classes, which requires additional work. Heavy workloads can be a factor that influences a teacher's decision to leave a rural district (Greenlee & Brown, 2009).

Rural school districts are faced with specific challenges regarding teacher retention and research has identified four rural-specific challenges: (a) difficult working conditions; (b) federal requirements for teachers to be highly qualified, meaning teachers in rural schools often have to become certified in multiple curriculum areas; (c) social and geographic isolation; and (d) less

pay (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Each of these factors is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Difficult working conditions in rural schools could cause teachers to label the school where they are working as not desirable, some of which could be related to concerns over the attitudes and behaviors of the students (Carter & Carter, 2000). Other factors that could cause teachers to be less satisfied with working conditions are having to teach outside their certified area and having to deal with inadequate supplies (Stockard & Lehman, 2004). These conditions could cause them to feel unprepared by not being comfortable with the material they are teaching or could frustrate them by requiring more preparation time. Low student enrollments can require teachers to teach subjects that are not in their certified teaching field, which is a common practice in small rural high schools. This additional responsibility means an increased workload for teachers. These challenging teaching assignments can frustrate teachers and affect the longevity of their stay in the teaching profession. Teachers who are in more difficult teaching assignments are also more likely to leave the education profession (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

NCLB requirements in school districts have affected hiring and retaining teachers. Because of NCLB, teachers had to earn the endorsement of being highly qualified in their subject area. In order to be considered highly qualified, teachers must have a bachelor's degree, be fully certified in their state, and be able to show competency in their subject area (Berry et al., 2004). NCLB not only required more from teachers, it added responsibility and paperwork to school districts. In addition to teacher certification, schools are required to report the number of highly qualified teachers in their district, develop a plan to guarantee that all teachers meet the requirements of being highly qualified, and publicly report the plans and progress of teachers in their district who are currently working to become highly qualified (Neill, 2006). The highly

qualified teacher regulations will remain after the new federal regulations are in place. All of these demands on schools and teachers have been developed to help improve student achievement in the classroom. Unfortunately, most of the policies surrounding being a highly qualified teacher have more to do with certification than with developing the positive attributes that typify effective teaching (Greenlee & Brown, 2009).

The added pressure of the federal requirement to have highly qualified teachers has contributed to rural schools challenges in retaining teachers. Rural schools with small populations often require their middle and high school teachers to teach more than one core subject, making it difficult for the teacher to be highly qualified in all subjects they instruct (Neill, 2006).

Until recently, NCLB required schools to meet predetermined levels of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in subjects such as math and reading. Schools that failed to meet AYP faced sanctions and additional requirements in the education of its students. Teaching in a school that has failed to make AYP can cause fear and frustration among the teachers, possibly serving as a key factor in retaining and recruiting high quality teachers (Berry, 2004). Small, rural schools can sometimes have an advantage over larger schools because their smaller enrollments give them fewer categories in which they have to meet AYP. Time will tell how the NCLB waiver and the newly enacted Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 will affect this advantage.

Social and geographic isolation can affect teacher retention in rural areas. Social isolation frequently occurs due to the geographic location of the school. Rural districts are often located far from large cities, which provide more amenities. A survey done in one rural school district found that weather/climate, geography/isolation, and distance from larger cities all contributed negatively to teacher retention (Murphy & Angelski, 1996/1997). The shortage of amenities

such as shopping options and movie theaters, as well as limited access to opportunities for professional growth, add to the difficulty that rural school districts face in attracting and retaining quality teachers (Jimerson, 2005). Working together with peers can be a benefit to educators. Teachers in many settings benefit from the opportunity to be a part of a school that provides for collaboration with other teachers through professional learning communities (Cochran-Smith, 2004). This opportunity is not always possible in small rural schools that sometimes have only one teacher per grade level or core subject area.

Some specific factors affect teacher retention when looking at the location of a community with regard to larger surrounding cities. Communities isolated geographically have a harder time attracting teachers, while rural schools located near suburban areas have a harder time retaining teachers (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

Teachers who move into rural school districts face the challenge of fitting in and becoming not only a part of the school, but part of the community. When these challenges are met, it can have a positive effect on teacher retention. Teachers in rural areas are likely to stay in a school to maintain ties with a community in which they feel supported (Barley & Beesley, 2007). A study of special education teachers in a rural area showed teachers who stayed and those who left had about equal ratings on their job satisfaction, but indicated the factor that determined if they changed jobs was their acceptance and involvement in the community (Bornfield, Hall, & Hoover, 1997). To improve the retention of teachers in their schools, rural districts and communities need to construct an environment that address the wants and needs of teachers in both their professional and personal lives. Compensation can also be a factor related to teacher retention.

Small, rural schools often experience difficulty hiring and retaining high quality teachers due to the fact they offer lower salaries (Tyler, 2003). Nationwide, teacher pay is lower in the smallest schools. The salaries of teachers in small schools are 16.5% below the national average (Monk, 2007). A study of schools in Texas found that beginning teachers in rural schools earned 14% less than beginning teachers in non-rural schools (Jimerson, 2005). A study of novice teachers in a western state found that teacher compensation and teacher retention were positively related (Stockard & Lehman, 2004). Higher salaries can lure teachers to other districts within the same geographic area. Hiring potential of teachers increased for districts that raised salaries to be competitive with those of other schools in their county (Figlio, 2002). Schools without the financial resources to raise teacher salaries struggle in hiring and retaining quality teachers. Rural schools that provide lower wages have to hire teachers from less qualified candidate pools and are more apt to face problems with teacher retention (Monk, 2007). In summary, empirical literature finds that larger salaries are associated with higher teacher retention (Guarino et al., 2006). As the difficulty of retaining teachers continues while budgets are being cut, school districts search for other ways to improve teacher retention.

### **Professional Benefits That Promote Retention**

School districts and communities need to be aware of factors other than salary that contribute to teacher retention. How attractive teaching is compared to alternative occupations they are qualified for plays an important role when teachers make decisions about staying or leaving the teaching profession (Guarino et al., 2006). Job satisfaction can play a role in whether or not a teacher remains at the same school, changes schools, or leaves teaching for another job. Data from a nationwide survey of 660 school teachers with less than 6 years of experience found that 83% of the teachers responded having a job that involves work one loves to do is essential

when determining a profession (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000). The decision to go into teaching shares the identical motivating factor to continue teaching, which is the feeling that out of all of the alternate activities they are qualified for, teaching is the best for them in terms of intrinsic rewards, salary, and work environment (Guarino et al., 2006).

### **Strategies to Improve Teacher Retention**

School districts can improve their teacher retention rate not only by recognizing the factors causing teachers to leave, but more importantly, developing plans to keep teachers in their schools. Many schools use similar recruiting strategies even though they may not produce the desired results. A wide range, one-size-fits all approach to teacher retention and recruitment is not predicted to produce the results desired by the school (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Three strategies that emerged from the research are providing school-level support for teachers, hiring from within the district, and involving current teachers in the hiring process.

Rural-specific research has found that improving support at the school level by providing a formal induction process and mentoring program to new teachers increased teacher retention. Teachers in their first three years who participated in an induction program had an attrition rate of 15% compared to 26% for teachers who did not receive any induction support (Berry, 2004). Programs that produced the best results started new teachers with reduced teaching and extracurricular responsibilities and had a formal mentoring program. New teachers rated their relationship with their mentor teacher as the most essential component in the success of the program (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Induction and mentoring programs in schools could lower turnover rate among new teachers (Guarino et al., 2006).

Finding people already living in the geographic area to fill openings can improve teacher retention. These grow-your-own programs target community members who are interested in

teaching in their local school districts and are likely to want to stay in the community (McClure & Reeves, 2004). Another option is hiring from within the district. Paraprofessionals are employees familiar with school policies and operating procedures. They are in classrooms daily and have experience working with students. Teacher education programs that seek paraprofessionals who are already familiar with and work in a school have shown signs of success and have high retention rates (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 contained a synthesis of empirical research, which produced three themes; (a) school demographics and teacher retention, (b) teaching environments that promote retention, and (c) strategies to improve teacher retention. In my review of the empirical literature, I found research pertaining to how geography and population affect teacher retention. The size and location of schools can impact teacher retention. The research also provided information that the environment of a school, academic ability of students, student discipline issues, and teacher compensation can all be a factor in retaining teachers. There was ample research on strategies that school districts can use to improve teacher retention. I found limited research on retention of highly qualified, tenured teachers.



## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design and Methodology

I used a qualitative case study research design framed in an appreciative inquiry theoretical perspective. I obtained different perspectives via focus groups and interviews and then examined the information without assuming there was a right and wrong (Patton, 2002). My study included thirteen highly qualified veteran teachers from Stanton High School.

Stanton High School teachers were given the opportunity to volunteer for this study. Volunteers who met the criteria of being tenured and highly qualified were purposively selected based on teaching experience and gender. The study looked to describe the positive core experiences of teachers and their dreams of a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching. Appreciative Inquiry uses a 4D Cycle to define this process.

#### AI 4D Cycle

There are four phases involved in the AI 4D Cycle; (a) discovery, (b) dream, (c) design, and (d) destiny. During the *discovery* phase, participants are asked to share stories about the best things about the past in regard to a specific topic. Using a specific protocol, participants are asked questions to bring out stories about experiences of when their organization was at its best and was most effective (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The discovery phase intends to define and highlight the best of what is in any give situation within an organization (Ludema et al., 2001). The *dream* phase asks participants to focus on what they would like to see within their organization. After going through the discovery phase and identifying the best of the organization, the next step is to look at new possibilities. The dream phase takes what is currently happening to imagining what could be and helps the participants generate thoughts and images of the ideal setting they desire (Barrett & Fry, 2005). The *design* phase seeks to organize

the dreams of the participants into a plan to improve the organization. A structure of how to improve the organization through the use of participants' dreams for the best of what could be is developed. The process involves a transformation from dreams, stories, and feelings to projects and actions. The *destiny* phase provides information to all of the participants of the plan developed throughout the AI 4D Cycle. The goal of this phase is help participants reach their shared dreams through a detailed plan that involves specific actions and outcomes.

I used only the discovery and dream phases of the 4-D cycle in my study to bring out the positive core experiences of the selected teachers at Stanton High School. Through this process, I gathered information about why these teachers have remained at their current school. The discovery phase relied on semi-structured interviews and focus groups to provide information about teachers' positive experiences at Stanton High School. The dream phase then allowed participants to provide information about what the organization could be and how that could affect their length of stay in the district. By defining what they liked about the district and sharing stories about what could be, I was able to provide information about what factors help teachers remain at a rural high school.

Participants were involved in two types of data collection methods: (a) semi-structured interviews and (b) focus groups. The questions for these data collection methods were formed around AI. This required the teachers to focus on the best aspects of the school and learn to identify and appreciate them (Cooperrider et al., 2003). They were asked to describe their positive core experiences for remaining in teaching. Participants were asked to remember when the organization was at its best, and how to produce more peak experiences in the future (Cooperrider et al., 2003). They were also asked to describe their dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching throughout their career.

## **Research Site**

The research site was Stanton USD, located in the Kansas community of Stanton, in Rice County. Stanton is situated in central Kansas, is approximately two hours from Wichita, and has a population of 2,536. The community is comprised of 1.2 square miles, and is 95% Caucasian, with African-American, Native American, Asian, or other minorities making up the remaining five percent of the population (IDcide, 2008).

The Stanton school district is comprised of 56 certified employees in two attendance centers. The enrollment of Stanton was 530 for the 2011-12 school year (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013). Approximately 42% of the district's students were considered economically disadvantaged which is lower than the state's average of 49 (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013).

Stanton High School (SHS) had a total of 18 certified faculty members and 156 students composed of 91 males and 65 females, with seven students representing all minorities and a total of 51 students with free and reduced lunch socioeconomic status. Stanton High School met the Standard of Excellence in state assessments in 2011-2012 in reading (Kansas State Department of Education, 2013).

## **Participants**

Participants for this study were selected from the 18 teachers at SHS. All tenured faculty members considered highly qualified had the opportunity to volunteer to be part of the study. Teachers were selected for the study based on the following criteria: (a) they were considered highly qualified by the Kansas State Department of Education, and (b) they were tenured and at least in their fifth year of teaching in the Stanton district.

I presented my study to all licensed teachers at Stanton High School at a faculty meeting. I had thirteen teachers volunteer who qualified based on the criteria listed above. The study had the goal to have participants that offered a range of experience and gender balance. The teachers selected participated in a semi-structured interview and a focus groups that asked them to share their positive core experiences in teaching and describe their dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain teaching at a small rural school throughout their career.

### **Data Collection**

This section will describe the methods I used to collect data for this study. Included in this section are descriptions of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups and how they were used in this study. Data collection was done during January, 2014. Questions were designed to determine positive core experiences they had as teachers at Stanton High School. Even though questions and procedures for this study were defined and developed, there was an understanding that adjustments would be made throughout the research. A key process to qualitative research is emergent design. Emergent design allows for the process to change once the researcher starts to collect data. An example of the change might be altering the questions based on responses given (Creswell, 2003).

### **Focus Group**

Two focus groups were conducted with the teachers selected for this study. A focus group is an interview that involves a small group, usually 6 to 10 people (Patton, 2002). The first focus group had seven participants and second focus group had six. The questions for the focus group were designed to allow participants to share their positive core stories about teaching with their peers and allowed participants to talk while being part of a relaxed atmosphere. The relaxed atmosphere of the focus group allowed all the participants to feel comfortable about sharing their

stories in a group setting. By hearing the stories of others, the participants were able to add their own opinions, which included similarities or differences. An audio recorder was used to guarantee all information is gathered. After the data from the focus groups was analyzed, sorted, and coded, semi-structured were conducted with four of the participants. Focus group questions are included in Appendix A.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with four of the teachers from SHS selected to participate in this study. After analyzing the data from the focus groups, two teachers from each group were chosen to participate in the interviews. The teachers were selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews based on the information they provided during the focus groups. Protocols and questions were based on the responses from the focus groups and were prepared in advance. Participants were given the opportunity to add to or clarify the information they provided in the focus groups. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to have participants recall peak experiences as a teacher at SHS. Interviews are useful when the researcher is not able to observe feelings, behavior, or how individuals interpret what is happening around them or when the researcher is interested in events of the past that cannot be replicated (Merriam, 1998). The majority of the interview was guided by issues and questions that left me with the flexibility to change some of the wording or the order in which the questions were asked to allow me to respond to new ideas that were shared on the topic and to deal with the situation at hand (Merriam, 1998). The four interview participants were given the opportunity to describe their positive core experiences in their teaching career. The questions also focused on their wishes for a teaching environment that would allow them to stay in the teaching profession throughout their working career. Documentation in the form of notes was

kept from the stories and each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim to assist in data analysis. Participants were able to add any comments that they wanted and were able to affirm the other participants as they shared their stories. Interview questions are included in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview and focus group data were audio recorded and then transcribed. A laptop computer was used to record the information. All of the audio recordings were listened to before they were transcribed. After transcription, the recordings were listened to again to help deepen knowledge and understanding of the information. The data were grouped by themes in a word document. The themes were then color coded for identification when documenting the results. The preferred way to analyze the data in qualitative studies is to do it simultaneously with the data collection (Merriam, 1998). Data were sorted through an open and axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process allowed me to analyze the data by the labeling of concepts. These similarities were organized into different categories as they applied to the research questions. As this process deepened, the axial coding provided for the identification of relationships across themes. The analysis of this data helped the researcher develop findings that will be discussed in chapter 4.

### **Delimitations**

There were some parameters to my research. Delimitations are self-imposed boundaries and limit the scope of the study (Calabrese, Sheppard, Hummel, Laramore, & Nance, 2006). My research had the following delimitations:

1. It was delimited to one 2A rural school district in Kansas.

2. It was delimited to high school teachers who are highly qualified and have been teaching at their current school for a minimum of five years.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are self-evident beliefs that if well constructed, can add to the validity of the study (Calabrese et al., 2006). My research had the following assumptions:

1. Teachers that remain in a school district for five years or more, have positive core experiences related to their jobs.
2. Teachers in rural Kansas' school districts have dreams of an environment that would sustain their desire to remain teaching at their current district.

### **Research Quality and Ethics**

Maintaining quality while conducting research was an integral part of this study. The quality of the research was improved through attending to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to increase the reliability of the information used in a case study, a chain of evidence must be maintained. The chain of evidence allows for a process to trace the data throughout the study (Yin, 1984). The information gathered from participants throughout this study was audio recorded to maintain accuracy. Records were kept of the time and date when information was collected and was also labeled to each individual participant. This not only provided valid information for the study but also insured that proper protocol was followed during the acquisition of information.

Data triangulation took place through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document review. By combining data through triangulation, the study was strengthened (Patton, 2002). Triangulation when used with multiple data sources means cross-checking and comparing data that was collected by observations or data collected through interviews with

people who have different perspectives or as a result of follow-up interviews with the same individuals (Merriam, 1998). It was important to document the data and at the same time capture the correct meaning from the participants.

Member checking throughout the collection of data allowed the researcher to verify the accuracy of the responses given by the participants. I used this strategy by taking my preliminary analysis of data from the focus groups back to the participants of the semi-structured interviews. This was the researcher's interpretation of the data but participants were able to recognize their contributions and provide suggestions if necessary that would do a better job of capturing their perspectives (Merriam, 1998). This was an important part of ruling out the chance of misinterpreting the meaning of participants comments (Merriam, 1998). My responsibility is to present the material in a manner that can be understood and applied as chosen (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Developing trust was an important part of this study. I built trust and confidence with the participants of the study in order to ensure the data from the research findings and recommendations was taken seriously by the interested organizations (Schein, 1995).

Ethics was considered an important part of gathering and interpreting data throughout the study. The researcher maintained a high level of awareness of the role that ethics can play in the validity of the study. The reliability and validity of the study depended in large part on the ethics of the person conducting the investigation. An informed consent form was developed which participants signed before engaging in the study. This form acknowledged that the rights of the participants were appropriately protected during the collection of data (Creswell, 2003). The Consent Form is included in Appendix C.



## **Role of the Researcher**

Being a rural high school building administrator with nine years of experience, I had preconceived thoughts about high school teachers and the setting in general. Before becoming a building administrator, I was a teacher for ten years. My undergraduate degree is in history and I am also certified to teach physical education. During my years as a teacher in a rural school, I taught varied subjects such as Government, American History, World History, Psychology, Sociology, Geography, and Physical Education. Teaching a wide range of subjects allowed me to work with students in grades 1 – 12. All but two years of my educational experience has occurred in the district in which I am currently employed. It is a small rural school located in central Kansas. I also attended this school as a student starting in first grade and ending with my high school graduation. Having a strong desire to continually improve this district led me to this study. I want to know what factors help teachers to remain at their rural school. I strived to minimize the biases that I brought to the research so that the data reported was accurate (Schein, 1995).

During focus group discussions, I served as the facilitator. My goal was to discover the positive core experiences and dream environments that motivate teachers to stay in teaching. I recognize the limits of my study, as I was only working with high school teachers in one rural setting. To compensate for this, I went deeper in analyzing the data, a process I detailed earlier in this chapter. I believed it was important to listen to the participants and also develop a good relationship with them (Merriam, 1998). I made myself aware of ethical issues related to the study and had the research proposal reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (Creswell, 2003). I included member checking throughout the process. Member checks provided a way to

verify that the data collected was accurate and also established credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 discussed the research design and methodology that was used with this study. The use of appreciative inquiry was used as a theoretical perspective of action research. The questions used were looking for positive core experiences from the participants. The use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews for this study were explained in detail. Chapter 3 also discussed data analysis methods, delimitations of the research, assumptions, research quality, and the role of the researcher.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Findings: Stanton High School Teacher Positive Core Experiences**

Chapter 4 presents findings from this study and has been divided into sections describing the main themes that came from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews: (a) Reasons for becoming a teacher, (b) Reasons for staying in the education profession, and (c) School culture. These main themes are further subdivided into categories that emerged from the analysis of data.

### **Research Site: Stanton High School**

Stanton High School is located in the rural community of Stanton, Kansas. The community is located in the central part of the state and is less than seventy miles from larger cities such as Hutchinson, Salina, and Wichita. Stanton has a population of 2,314 and a median household income of \$43,071. The population growth rate from 2010-14 was -0.14% and the average family size was 3, which is indicative of a slight population decline (U.S. HomeTownLocator, 2015). The top three industries in Stanton are manufacturing (14%), construction (14%), and educational services (13%) (U.S. HomeTownLocator, 2015).

Thirteen teachers from Stanton High School participated in this study, seven men and six women; all are white. The shortest length of tenure at the school among the teachers was five years, with the longest being 31 years. Eight of the teachers had been teaching at Stanton High School for over 21 years. Table 1 lists the names of the participants, the subject they taught, and the number of years they have taught in Stanton.

Table 1

*Stanton High School Teachers, Subject, and Years Teaching*

Teacher	Subject Taught	Years Teaching in Stanton
Dustin	Art	5
Tom	Social Studies	7
Joan	Physical Education/Health	7
Rachel	Math	10
Ken	Industrial Arts	21
Mark	Science	23
Bill	Social Studies	25
Connie	Foreign Language	25
Carl	Vocal Music	25
Lonnie	Instrumental Music	28
Claire	Family and Consumer Science	29
Dave	Science	29
Brenda	Language Arts	31

### **Reasons for Becoming a Teacher**

In order to understand why these veteran teachers have chosen to remain in the teaching profession it was helpful to understand what led them to become a teacher in the first place. The next section briefly describes some of those reasons. Their stories and comments from this theme are divided into four categories: (a) parents/family, (b) former teachers, (c) personal experience and (d) coaching.

## **Parents/Family: A Legacy of Teachers**

Multiple teachers involved in the study shared how their parents and other family members played an important part in their decision to become a teacher, although this type of legacy is becoming rarer as many teachers are advising their children not to go into teaching. For example, Tom shared when he went to college and was trying to pick a major, he thought back fondly to the way of life he had growing up. His Dad was a teacher and Tom wanted the same lifestyle for his own family that he experienced while he was a child. Bill's Dad told him he should be a teacher and so that is what he did. He was able to observe his Dad's former students coming back to visit him. That had an impact on him and influenced his decision to become a teacher. Bill described growing up in a small town in Western Kansas where his Grandpa was such a popular and successful teacher that they named the grade school after him. "I thought that my family members that were teachers were celebrities. It was a cool thing to get to do," he said. Brenda told about the impact her Mom and grandparents had on her decision to become a teacher. She said,

I come from a great line of teachers. My Grandpa was a principal, my Grandma was a teacher; my Mom was a teacher. I taught my sister how to read and thought there was no greater profession. I just thought it would be so fun to have my own classroom.

Connie told a similar story. Her Mom and Grandfather were teachers as are her daughters. She also always wanted to have her own classroom. She commented about the family, "It's just kind of what we do." Lonnie's family members were also educators. His Mom taught in high school before he was born and then at the college level when he was growing up. His sisters are also currently teaching.

## **Former Teachers and Coaches**

Teachers at Stanton High School were also influenced to become educators by teachers that they had growing up. Claire discussed how much her junior high home economics teacher influenced her, when she said, “I really liked my junior high home economics teacher and the feeling she left with me of how a classroom was operated.” Claire felt her former teacher demonstrated a good balance between managing the classroom and still allowing her students to interact with each other and have fun learning. She enjoyed classroom activities such as baking, sewing, and learning how to build a budget. Claire credits these experiences for her decision to major in home economics in college and go into the teaching profession. She said, “I really owe it to my junior high home economics teacher for the reason I became a teacher.” Carl also had a positive experience with a former teacher who not only led him into the teaching profession, but also contributed to the subject area he chose to teach. He shared, “I think that my going into teaching music had a lot to do with my junior high choir teacher. She was a great teacher and that kind of got me fired up to be a teacher.” Dustin, who is also an alumnus of Stanton High School, returned to the community as a teacher based on the positive experiences he had as a student. He shared, “I just love Stanton. I grew up here. The teachers I had when I was at Stanton are some of the reasons why I wanted to come back here and teach.”

Stanton teachers also described the influence of teachers who were coaches on their decision to become a teacher. Dave shared how a former teacher and coach influenced his career choice when trying to decide what profession to go into; that some of the most influential people in his life were teachers and coaches. Dave stated, “I had a tremendous amount of respect for what they did and how they did it. I learned a lot of lessons from them that have stuck with me.” His cross-country coach would run with the team each day and Dave developed a strong

relationship with this person. He described his cross-country coach as “kind of like a second Dad.” He went back to his hometown and visited with some of his teachers and coaches. He asked his cross-country coach about what it took to be a teacher and what he liked and disliked about his job. Dave noted, “I went back and talked to them and that’s when I decided to become a teacher.” Mark shared a similar reason for going into teaching and returning to teach at the school he graduated from, “I had great teachers and coaches and that weighed heavily on my decision. When the opportunity presented itself to come back to Stanton, it was an easy choice for me.”

### **Personal Experiences**

Some of the teachers shared personal experiences that influenced their decision to be a teacher. These included wanting to provide opportunities for students they did not have when they were in school, being able to share their passions and talents with others, and having variety in their professional lives.

The teaching profession has provided teachers at Stanton with the opportunity to satisfy personal goals while also finding satisfaction in their jobs. Connie talked about attending a small school where she did not receive the same opportunities that students at a larger school got. When she was an elementary school student, they were lucky to have music class once per week. This gave her a strong desire to become an elementary music teacher where she could teach students some of things that she did not have the opportunity to learn when she was growing up. Connie recalled,

I went to a parochial school for a long time where we had music maybe once per week. I remember thinking it would be nice to go and share my desire for music with kids because growing up, I didn’t get as much as I would have liked.

Lonnie's favorite hobby in high school and college was doing anything that involved music. He was excited about the opportunity to go into a profession that allowed him to spend the day focused on his favorite hobby and sharing it with others. He explained, "I spent all of my spare time with music and thought this is where I need to be. I made the decision that is what I need to do for a living." One of the reasons Brenda chose to enter the education profession is it allowed her to use her talents to help others. She elaborated, "I thought it was a way to use your gifts and in my case, that was teaching theater. I thought teaching was an avenue for using gifts that you really had a passion for."

A desire for variety in their daily professional lives was another reason some teachers chose to enter the education profession. Dave initially studied biology in college because he wanted to work for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. That decision changed when he saw what the available jobs entailed, which helped him make the decision to become a biology teacher instead. He explained, "There was a lot of competition in the outdoor biology field. I interviewed for a couple of lab positions and I could just not see myself in a lab doing the same test for forty hours each week." During the middle of his senior year in college he decided that he wanted to be a teacher.

### **Desire to Coach**

Five of the teachers in this study indicated their own desire to coach athletics contributed to their decision to become a teacher. Joan felt that being a coach was the main factor involved in her becoming an educator when she said,

I got into it more for coaching. I started off just wanting to coach and it seemed like the most reasonable manner to be a teacher along with it. Now, I enjoy coaching and really enjoy teaching, but coaching is what got me started in the profession.



While Bill did not choose to be a teacher just to coach, he admitted that it played a part in his decision. He shared, “I wanted to coach too and that probably helped drive my decision to become a teacher.” Dave also indicated that wanting to be a coach gave him the desire to become a teacher. “I got started with coaching when I was in college and I enjoyed it so much that it sort of steered me in the direction of teaching, and once I started taking education classes, I loved it,” he said. Ken went to college to major in industrial arts, anticipating he would have a career in industry, not education. The thought of coaching helped sway him toward the education profession. Ken explained his decision, “I knew that I would like to coach so I chose the teacher side of industrial education after I was in college for a couple of years.” Mark shared that while he was in college, he had the opportunity to work with young kids in a coaching capacity, an experience that influenced him to choose teaching as a profession. As he explained,

I was probably a sophomore in college before I decided that education was the avenue I wanted to go into. I had an opportunity to work a couple of football camps and really enjoyed interacting with young people and decided that would be something that I would enjoy doing.

Parents and family, former teachers and coaches, personal experiences, and the desire to be a coach had an impact on the decision to be a teacher. Listening to the stories that were shared about the reasons they chose to become teachers helped to understand where they came from and how they got here. The next section will focus on why the teachers in this study have remained in the teaching profession.

### **Reasons for Staying in the Education Profession**

The teachers shared personal stories that reflected why they came to Stanton and why they have chosen to remain in the teaching profession. Their stories and comments from this

theme are divided into five categories; (a) geographic location, (b) community, (c) family benefits, (d) peer teachers, and (e) job satisfaction.

### **Geographic Location**

From a geographical standpoint, Stanton's location provided incentives for several of the teachers to relocate to the community to teach, and then to remain there. Many of these reasons were related to having family in the area and a desire to be closer to the town where they or their spouse grew up. For example, Claire initially came to the Stanton area because she married someone from the area. She explained, "So really, it was marriage that brought me to Stanton." She was a substitute teacher for the first year that she lived in Stanton, noting, "I taught one year at Nickerson then the job I currently have came open and the Stanton administration asked if I would be interested in applying." She applied, got the job, and has been teaching in Stanton since then. Marriage was also the main reason that Joan ended up in her current position. She started her career teaching in Concordia for five years. Joan shared,

Marriage brought me to Stanton as a resident and while living here, I got a job teaching in Nickerson for nine years. When the job in Stanton came open and I was asked to apply, I knew I wanted to be in the same district as my kids.

A number of these teachers were asked or encouraged to apply for positions in Stanton as they became available.

Moving to the area to be closer to family brought several of these teachers to Stanton. Ken shared he taught at other schools before returning to Stanton, which was his wife's hometown. He explained,

I started out in a small school in Western Kansas, then moved to Colorado and taught for a couple years out there. The job that I am currently in came open and my wife wanted me to apply for it and that is how I got to Stanton.

Tom had a similar personal reason for coming to Stanton to be a teacher. He explained, “I was wanting to find a job in central Kansas because my wife is from the nearby town of Hutchinson. I’m here because they offered me a job.”

Finding jobs for themselves and their spouse led a couple of teachers to the Stanton area. Connie explained that her family moved to Stanton because her husband wanted to find a job in the central part of Kansas. After taking a job in a neighboring town, having a family, and staying home for six years, she needed to find employment within driving distance of Stanton. Connie said, “When a position opened up in Stanton, I got back into teaching and have been here ever since.” Clark and his wife were both looking for teaching positions and he felt like the location of the college they were attending helped them get jobs in the Stanton district. He explained, “My wife and I were looking to get jobs together. We were both Stanton College graduates and there was a kindergarten opening and a vocal music opening and we both applied and got offered jobs.”

Shorter commutes and a desire for small town life motivated a few teachers to relocate to Stanton. Rachel lived in nearby while teaching her first four years in the McPherson district. After she had kids of her own, she wanted to find a job with a shorter commute so she took a job teaching middle school in Lyons. After two years at there, a job teaching high school students came open in Stanton. “I got the job at Stanton and loved it. I have since moved to Stanton,” Rachel shared. Bill talked about his preference of finding a job in a small, rural school to avoid traffic.

If I taught in Wichita, I would have to drive 30-40 minutes in traffic each day to get to my job. In a bigger town, you may be closer to a Wal-Mart, but by the time you drive through traffic, it would take you longer than where I currently live.

While the geographical location provided many of the teachers with a reason to move there, the next section discusses how the community of Stanton has provided them with reasons to stay.

### **Stanton Community**

Many of the teachers mentioned qualities of the Stanton community that have led them to like their job and a desire to continue teaching in the same position. These qualities included a positive relationship between the community and school, the size of community, and the town and school's positive reputation.

One of the main reasons these teachers have remained in Stanton is due to the positive and supportive relationship that exists between the school and community. They appreciated the community of Stanton because of the way the school and community worked together. Joan liked the strong school-community relationship, saying, "You come to Stanton and everything is intertwined between the community and school. I like those connections and I think it makes getting relationships with the students easier. That connection is important to me." She also described the Stanton community as being supportive of education, noting, "Stanton is a town that truly values education. The community values teachers and views teaching as an honorable profession." Mark added, "There is a culture here in Stanton of quality education and support from parents." Dave also recognized and appreciated the community's support for the school system. He said, "Stanton is a great community and has a very good school system. I have been lucky to have a lot of support from the school and the community." Before teaching in Stanton, Dave's experiences with education were with larger schools and he thought he would only be at

Stanton for a couple of years before moving to another district. He shared, “I graduated from Salina Central and briefly taught in the McPherson district. Twenty-nine years later, I am still at Stanton. It has been a great place to be.” He mentioned that for a number of years, he would take his students on a summer field trip to Colorado where they could hike, explore nature, and compare what they had learned in the classroom to the real world. Over the years, community members have served as chaperones and area businesses helped sponsor the trip. Although other districts in the state likely offered similar experiences, Dave had no desire to go anywhere else. He explained, “I don’t think that Stanton is the only place that I could do what I am currently doing but when I found those opportunities here, I didn’t see any reason to go somewhere else.” Bill described the Stanton community and parents as being supportive of students’ education, noting, “The teachers get good support from home and the community.”

Teachers also valued the size of Stanton. Being a small town and school district allowed Stanton to provide a comfort level for people to get to know each other and their families. As an alumnus of Stanton High School, Lonnie was familiar with the community and school system. He said,

I went to high school in Stanton and I wanted to come back here and teach because of the community. I value a small, community atmosphere where we know people and people know my kids. We sort of look out for each other.

The small town atmosphere contributed to a positive outlook on the town and school from people outside the area. This gave teachers a sense of pride in being a teacher and community member. They spoke about the community and school’s good reputation throughout the state. Lonnie said,

I'm proud to be able to go to other places and say that I am from Stanton. People recognize that it is a positive place to be. There are people that move to Stanton because they want their kids to go to school here and I'm proud that I can be a part of that.

They generally felt the Stanton community provided a feeling of comfort for its residents. Tom said, "I think in Stanton, teachers and students have a level of comfort that comes from knowing each other both in and out of school." The town's small size helped contribute to this feeling.

Tom added,

Because of the size of the community, I see the students in a variety of roles and they see the teachers in a variety of roles both in and out of schools and I think that helps create a level of comfort. The values of the school and community make it a good place to be.

Some of this overlap between the school and community came from interactions between students and teachers at church, summer recreation programs, and social events. The community has played an important part in keeping teachers in Stanton. The next section will focus on the family benefits that have contributed to teachers wanting to stay in Stanton.

### **Family Benefits**

Many of the teachers felt being a teacher in Stanton provided benefits for their families. These benefits included Stanton being a great place to raise a family, a good school system for their own children to attend, and the school calendar.

Teachers truly appreciated living in Stanton because of the wholesome environment for raising their children and the outstanding school system. "Stanton is a great place to raise my children," said Claire. Joan shared similar feeling about raising her family in Stanton, "Part of the draw for me teaching in Stanton is my family. I wouldn't want to move my kids to another school, so that contributes to me wanting to stay here." The school provided a positive academic

and social experience for their children. Joan went on to explain, “As a Mom in the Stanton district, I appreciate the fact that the experience that my kids are getting is so well rounded.” Raising a family in the Stanton district also provided Carl with an incentive to remain teaching there. He said, “I stuck around as a teacher because I liked teaching here. Then after I had kids, I wanted them to go here.” A good school system for his own kids was a priority for him to stay in Stanton. He believed the school system was so good, that one might question whether there was a better place to be.

Teachers felt strongly about the academic benefits of having their kids attend school in the Stanton district. Connie noted, “The academics at Stanton are very strong.” Consequently, they believe the education their children are receiving will provide them with opportunities after they graduate. Connie expressed, “Our kids can graduate and go anywhere to college and be successful whether it is a major university, private school, or junior college. They have been well prepared for whatever it is they decide to do.” The deep appreciation Connie has for the school even transferred to her extended family. “I wouldn’t want my kids to go anywhere else, and now I find myself wanting my grandkids to go here,” she claimed.

The traditional school calendar that gave them time with their families was another benefit these teachers identified as a reason for staying in the profession. Being a teacher requires working more than the standard eight-hour day for many days of the year. However, it also provides for extended time off that can be spent with family. Dave described the teaching profession as a lifestyle, saying, “Some of the reasons that I have stayed in the teaching profession is the flexibility and lifestyle.” He went into detail about the lifestyle of being a teacher that he enjoys.

Family is another reason why I have stayed in education. Time matters. Time off at Christmas with my own kids and time off during summer is very important to me. When we are not working sixty hours per week, we can devote time to our family.

Bill also felt that time off in the summer was a reason he has continued to teach, noting, "I like the summers and cherish the time off." Even though he likes the time off, the drive to be a good teacher keeps him motivated to work. Bill explained, "I cherish my summers off, but after four to five weeks, I find myself at school preparing for the next year." Several teachers mentioned teaching in Stanton provided them with time in the summer to spend with their families. Lonnie shared,

Quite simply, teaching has given me an occupation and a way to provide for my family.

My wife also works in the Stanton school system so we have our summers that we can spend with our kids and do things. That is invaluable to me.

Teaching requires give and take and at times, these teachers are not always around for family as much as they would like. Lonnie mentioned, "There are times during the year, like the next upcoming months, where I am gone a lot because of my job during the evenings and weekends. The time I have off in the summer is a trade off for that." Along with liking the family benefits of the academic calendar, the teachers at Stanton also expressed their peers played a part in their job satisfaction.

### **Peer Teachers**

The staff at Stanton High School appreciates and respects each other. They value the opinion of their peers and work together to help their students succeed. The staff gave examples of positive characteristics of their peers that demonstrated why they enjoy teaching in Stanton.



Their peers (a) were good/caring teachers, (b) enjoyed their jobs, (c) worked together as part of a team, (d) demonstrated leadership qualities, and (e) respected each other.

Teachers at Stanton felt that their peers were good teachers who cared about their work. For example, Claire said, “There is a great staff at the schools in Stanton.” Mark had similar feelings about the overall quality of the staff at Stanton. He expressed, “I wouldn’t say that every teacher that ever came here was great, but if they weren’t, they weren’t here very long.” Carl commented, “Up and down the halls, the teachers are winners and I’m not sure you get that in every public school.” Lonnie shared his thoughts on the subject by saying, “I value a staff here at school that I think is great.” Dave felt his peers were good teachers and co-workers who were good at their jobs, and shared, “As I look up and down our hallways, we have a lot of very strong, very good faculty members.” Carl felt the quality of the teachers at Stanton gave him confidence in watching his own children go through the district. He had high expectations for his own children, which included wanting them to have a well-rounded education where they not only learned the required curriculum, but also learned to appropriately interact with other people. Stanton faculty met those expectations and Carl was pleased with the quality of people who taught his children. Carl expressed, “What gives me comfort in sending my kids here is probably just knowing the staff. Not only are they good teachers, they are good people. I want my kids to be taught and coached by these people.” The strength of the teachers allowed them to continually stay at a high level of quality instruction year after year. Mark said, “What makes us a good school district is the quality of the system and the people. I’ve always believed that quality breeds quality. We have quality teachers and administrators and I think it is a perpetual thing.” Bill observed, “Our staff is made up of good teachers.”

Stanton students know the teachers are supportive of their learning in all classes and activities and are there to help them in any way possible. When students know they are cared for, they will put forth the effort to learn. Bill stated, “You can know everything, but if the kids don’t like you because you don’t like them, they won’t want to learn.” This requires building relationships with students that demonstrate that along with teaching the curriculum, teachers were there to support students in any way possible. Mark added, “There is a mutual respect that you have to earn. We are not here just to teach our subject.”

The teachers at Stanton High School felt, as a group, they cared about their students, had high expectations, and focused on helping them be successful. For example, Ken said, “I think that everyone here that teaches in this district genuinely cares about kids and I’ve seen other districts where that is not the case.” The relationships the teachers at Stanton have established with their students contributed to the student’s efforts to want to learn. Dave commented about the high expectations, “One of the things I like as a staff is we expect a lot out of our students. As teachers, we invest a lot in our programs and I think the students pick up on that and in return, they invest and work hard with us.” This was an important part of the education given to students at Stanton. Lonnie indicated, “Teachers really want to help the students achieve and do the best that they can in all areas. Teachers want to help the students succeed, whether it is in learning mathematics or being in a drama production.” Along with caring for their students, the teachers at Stanton also felt their peers enjoyed their work.

The teachers at Stanton felt strongly their peers enjoyed teaching. Lonnie said, “Everyone truly enjoys what they are doing. I am proud of the school system and our faculty that we have here.” Carl identified some of the characteristics of the teaching staff and how they translated into helping students be successful. One characteristic was teachers taking pride in the

subject they teach and programs they are responsible for. Stanton teachers were willing to put in extra time to help students achieve at a high level. Carl boasted, “Every staff member is strong and there is not a weak program in the building.” The additional effort put in by the staff at Stanton helps to guarantee that all students are successful. Carl further claimed, “If you are a student coming into Stanton and can’t make it here, you are not going to make it anywhere.” Dave had similar thoughts about how the staff at Stanton does everything they possibly can to help their students succeed. He expressed, “You look up and down the halls and I think as a staff we go above and beyond what is in our contract.” He felt the staff takes an approach of doing whatever it takes to help students succeed and follows the motto, “What is it going to take to do this job and do it the best we can?” He felt the teaching staff’s strong work ethic helped their students. He followed up by saying, “Every year there is the expectation that all of us are working hard at whatever we do. We keep learning and getting better to help kids.”

These teachers believed their ability to work together and be part of a team were other positive characteristics of their peers. Many of the teachers at Stanton have long tenures with the district. This has allowed teachers the opportunity to work together over a long period of time. The length of time that teachers work together helps them to get to know each other. Dave acknowledged that having a staff comprised of members with many years of teaching experience was important in helping their school offer good programs and high quality learning experiences for their students. Dave stated, “When you look at a tenure list of our teachers and see what percentage of staff have been here fifteen years or longer, you understand that it obviously helps our success.” However, teachers were not just satisfied with having lengthy years of teaching experience. Dave felt teachers continued to push themselves each year to be better teachers than the year before. He added, “I don’t see anyone on staff that just says, “I’m in my comfort zone

and I'm just going to ride it out." The reason they do this is to make sure they do everything in their power to help their students. They felt it was important to be around teachers who were good at what they did and felt strongly about the importance of the faculty working together for the betterment of the students. Lonnie affirmed, "I think the willingness for our faculty to work together is one of the things I value most about this school system." Dave said, "I am part of a team and that is something I feel very fortunate about." Carl agreed, "You can go to each staff member and they are all on the same page in the way that we work with our students." By working together instead of in isolation, the students received a broader educational experience. Carl went on to say, "I really value the fact that our staff is willing to cooperate and work together and understand that there is a broader picture to our students' education than what I am doing." For Carl, this has meant sometimes realizing his music program might not be the most important thing in the lives of his students. He admitted, "I have to know that for my students, band is not everything. They are also athletes, in the drama production, and doing other things." He went on to share about a time in his class when the teachers worked together to benefit students.

I had a director from a college coming to work with my students and we needed a longer period of time so I asked the other teachers if I could have the students the hour before my class. Everyone was willing to do that. We give and take because we understand that there are times when this program needs a little extra time. If we were all focused on thinking, "no that is my time, you can't have it," students would lose out on a lot.

Participants appreciated the teachers at Stanton working together to help the students. Joan mentioned, "We have good teachers that care about kids. There is a camaraderie among staff that we want the students to do well in all classes and activities." This was a benefit of teaching

at Stanton that Joan did not always see when she was a teacher in other districts. She added, “It is neat to see that. I did not always see that in the other schools that I taught.” The teachers worked together to support areas outside of their own. For example, athletic coaches and teachers from the music department worked together to balance their schedules so students could participate in both activities without having to miss practices.

Teachers at Stanton indicated their peers possessed leadership qualities that would transfer to any district they chose to work in. Dan expressed, “They are people that would be leaders on any staff and to be a part of that is a neat experience.” These leadership qualities were mentoring and guiding new teachers, respecting each other, and taking the initiative as teachers to ensure the learning of all of their students.

Providing mentoring to new teachers was another way Stanton teachers demonstrated leadership. Mentoring other teachers was a leadership quality that Bill displayed. He felt he could help the students at Stanton by providing mentoring and guidance for another teacher. Bill said, “Dustin and I talk all the time and share professional books we read all the time.” Through their informal conversations, Bill became interested in trying to help Dustin improve the quality of his teaching. Bill added, “I am honestly trying to be an instructional leader to him because last year he talked to me about being a little bit bored in the classroom.” As they talked about finding ways to challenge Dustin and to renew his enthusiasm for teaching, they looked to areas outside the classroom walls. Bill commented, “I think he has found that in the coaching area. This new motivation has improved his classroom, which has helped his students.”

Teachers’ support of each other within the junior-senior high school could be seen throughout the district. To illustrate, Connie said, “It is an amazing thing. Even in elementary, the support that we have from people from the ground up is just incredible.” The teachers at

Stanton High School made comments that demonstrated respect and support for each other. “There is not any animosity between the teachers,” declared Bill. Rachel shared a similar thought; “I don’t feel like I’m having to compete with the teacher next door and I don’t think that is always the case at other schools.” Dave followed up with, “It is a neat experience to be part of a team like this from a staff standpoint.”

A couple of the teachers pointed out that their support and respect for each other has grown into friendships that extend beyond the school walls. Some teachers felt a connection to other teachers above what would be considered a normal peer working relationship due to the length of their tenure at Stanton. Living in a small community contributed to an overlap in some of their out of school activities. Lonnie pointed out, “A lot of us are friends outside of school and we are involved in the same activities or go to the same church.” He felt this social interaction outside the school day was a positive part of their job, noting, “We know each other socially outside of school and that helps a lot.” Joan felt the majority of teachers in the Stanton district have similar religious beliefs, which helped to strengthen their bond as peers. She made the comment, “I’m lucky to be where I’m at. I’m around people who have a similar faith or belief system.” Small town values contributed to these teachers’ job satisfaction.

### **Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction was another factor influencing these Stanton High School teachers to remain in their current positions. For many of the teachers, the feeling of making a difference, having an impact on another person’s life, and student learning were key factors to their job satisfaction. Dave gets that feeling from teaching, stating simply, “You feel like you are making a difference.” Bill shared a similar thought, “Each one of us have students that we have impacted, some probably more than others.” Joan agreed that having an impact on her students

motivated her to continue to be a teacher. She said, “Being a teacher has impacted me greatly in the fact that I feel that what I do is important.” That feeling of making a difference was not something that she felt she could get from another job. Her positive thoughts about making a difference were directly related to interactions with her students. Joan felt she was able to communicate with her students in a way that allowed her to help them through difficult times in their lives, saying “I feel like I do a lot of counseling for my students, which helps them deal with challenges they are facing. I am teaching life lessons.” This provided her with job satisfaction and a feeling that she was making a difference in their lives. Joan added, “That level of interaction and the feeling that I am providing something for them makes me feel good about what I am doing.” She followed that up with, “I think my desire to continue teaching goes back to feeling purposeful. Whether it is in class or when I’m coaching, it is being able to interact with my students.” For others, knowing they have made a difference in student lives helps motivate them to remain in teaching. Bill noted, “I would be disappointed if I never had an impact on my students. We all want to have an impact on kids.” Brenda made a similar comment, “Being a teacher lets you have an impact on somebody’s life and that is a great feeling. Your students remember you and you know that they are really listening to you.” Dave described getting a similar feeling from working with kids, “I like feeling like you make a difference.” This happened both in the classroom and during extra-curricular activities; according to Dave, “Whether you see students in the classroom or in activities, you understand that the work you have done matters,” which, for Dave, was one of the biggest benefits of being in the education profession. He concluded, “I think that is the most rewarding thing you get from being a teacher.”

Being able to pass on a talent or skill to their students was important for one of the teachers. Lonnie was able to take his hobby of enjoying music and turn it into a profession that gives him a feeling of satisfaction. Lonnie said, “By becoming a teacher, I could share my love of music with other people.” This has contributed to him being satisfied with his job. He added, “It makes you feel good about what you are accomplishing.” Lonnie found that he can give his students something they can take with them after they graduate from Stanton. Lonnie stated, “I am able to watch them progress through high school with a love for music that they will hopefully carry with them for the rest of their lives.”

Another component of job satisfaction for the teachers at Stanton was student learning and achievement. The teachers are willing to reach out to students and help them learn. To illustrate, Carl said, “We have a staff that is going to go out and get you and help you.” Having a key role in the student’s learning allowed teachers to enjoy their jobs. Ken found the motivation to remain in the profession was watching his students learn. He shared, “In the industrial arts area, I get the kids that want to use their hands. They build something and accomplish that, and are proud of it. That makes me feel good and makes me want to continue teaching.” It made a difference for Bill to become more student-centered in the way he approached his job. He shared this insight, “I am really trying to focus less on myself and more about what is going on with my students in the classroom.” Through being focused on the needs of students, teachers felt they had a greater impact on learning. Bill wanted his students to remember him and what they learned in his classes. “I do want to be that teacher that they remember after they graduate. I want to give them something everyday in class so that they remember me,” he said. Bill works to accomplish this by working hard to relate to his students. He added, “I spend a lot of time trying to make them realize that what I am giving them or sharing with them has a long term



meaning rather than here it is, do it for a grade and move on.” An early coaching experience helped push Dustin into the teaching profession and that same feeling continues to motivate him to remain in teaching. Dustin said, “From the first season that I coached in college, to see the kids accomplish something and their excitement and attitude towards seeing that accomplishment is what hooked me.” As a teacher at Stanton, he has been able to get that same feeling from his classroom. “Now, in the classroom it is the same thing. Seeing the students achieve something is rewarding beyond anything you can do in any other profession,” said Dustin. Watching others succeed gives Dustin satisfaction, as he noted, “Being able to help someone else achieve a dream allows you to see pure joy on their face.” To support the desire to help students learn, Rachel said, “I teach calculus and I love that because that is when all of the math the students have done all these years finally comes together and they can see how it works and it is always an exciting moment.” She enjoyed being able to watch students grow throughout their high school career. Rachel commented, “I do enjoy the interaction with the high school students and it is fun to watch them progress from freshman to seniors.” Dustin also felt motivated to stay in the education profession from watching his students learn. He stated, “A lot of the students don’t know if they can do something when we start a project in class.” By working with the students on a daily basis, he can help them complete a project. Dustin added, “I get to see the look on their face when they finish their project and realize what they have done and that makes me excited to be a teacher.” Joan enjoyed watching students take what they have learned in her Health class and apply it to their everyday life. She mentioned, “When you see a student buy in to what you are teaching, they appreciate it and use some of the information you are teaching them.” She gave a specific example: “For me, it involved times when I am teaching

them about being healthy and then they want to start an exercise program and start eating healthier.”

Teachers recognized that students sometimes did not immediately show their appreciation for the care they received. Regardless of the timeframe in which it happened, teachers appreciated knowing their students learned something and built relationships that helped them after leaving Stanton High School. Joan felt good about knowing she helped her students learn and grow, saying, “It’s sometimes a delayed feeling of accomplishment that I get from students when they come back and tell me that I helped them.” She mentioned that students who graduated from Stanton have come back to see her and have shared how they benefitted from being in her class. She mused, “I have enjoyed visiting with students who have come back after being in my class and they have told me that some of the things that we talked about in class have helped them in other areas of their life.” The comments from her students help her to appreciate her job. “The feedback, even if it is sometimes delayed, makes me feel good about my job,” said Joan. The relationships that teachers have with their students also extended past graduation. Lonnie said, “I get to build relationships with kids and then see them years later.” This was important to him. Lonnie added, “Students come back and I get to talk to them and slide into that relationship that we had. That means a lot to me.” The next section will discuss the impact that school culture has played on the teachers at Stanton.

### **School Culture**

Stanton High School teachers provided details and thoughts about the positive impact of their profession that are a result of the school culture. Their stories and comments from this theme are divided into five categories; (a) comparison of Stanton to other schools/communities,

(b) teacher/student relationships (c) comfortable atmosphere, (d) focus on students, (e) faculty work ethic, and (f) school leadership.

### **Comparison of Stanton to other Schools**

Teachers at Stanton felt the culture within the school promoted positive behavior and participation from the students. They supported this belief by comparing the students at Stanton to those they had taught at other schools and by describing their observations of students who transferred into Stanton. For example, Brenda had observed transfer students who had behavior problems at other schools. The culture at Stanton does not provide students with the opportunity to continue with their inappropriate behaviors. She shared, “It is amazing to see kids that would be labeled trouble-makers come in to our school and try to cause problems for a day or two and then realize that no one around them is disrespecting their teachers.” She felt students who moved into Stanton soon realized there was an expectation they will work hard and be a good person. Connie also noticed students who transferred to Stanton often had to change their behavior in order to fit in. She felt some students were accustomed to getting away with behaviors not accepted at Stanton. There was consistency among the teachers in dealing with some of these behavior issues. Connie said, “Sometimes it takes awhile for them to change, but eventually, they change because they hear the same thing from all of the teachers.” Rachel also noticed a difference in the behavior of some students who transferred into to Stanton. New students who did not follow the expected behavior stood out from the rest of the student body and eventually adjusted their behavior to fit in with the other students. Rachel observed, “You have these kids that transfer in and they are doing some crazy antics and all of the other students just kind of look at them. They assimilate pretty quickly.” Joan talked about coming from another school to Stanton. During her first year at Stanton, there was a talent show for the

students on the last day of school. She described a student getting up on stage to sing a serious and slow moving song. As the student was singing, she thought the other students would laugh or boo based on other talent shows she had watched as a teacher in another town. Instead, she was pleasantly surprised by the reaction of the student body: “They just clapped for the student and then they moved on to the next participant. I think that is what Stanton is; accepting of each other.”

Stanton provided a culture that allowed teachers and students to interact with each other in ways that some of the teachers did not experience when they taught in other districts. For example, before coming to Stanton, Claire taught in a district less than twenty miles from Stanton. She liked her job there, but noticed differences in how the students and teachers interacted with each other. Claire noted, “When I took the job at Stanton, I found out that you could connect with the students more than at my previous school.” Bill also felt there was a noticeable difference at Stanton in how the teachers and students interacted with each other. At his previous school, if a teacher talked to students outside of the classroom, the students would look at him and think he was weird. Bill felt it was different at Stanton, “I noticed that there was a culture of respect between students and teachers as soon as I walked in the door.” This culture of respect was a key factor in how students and teachers communicated with each other. Bill observed, “When I came to Stanton, all of the teachers talked to the students. It was very different from the school that I came from.”

Three teachers gave credit to the community of Stanton for providing a better teaching environment than their previous community. Lonnie mentioned that Stanton was the third town where he has taught. Although he did not dislike the previous two places, they did not provide the same opportunity to build strong programs as he could in Stanton. Lonnie stated, “We have a

lot of really strong programs in Stanton and it is because of the support of the community and the culture of quality within the school.” If Bill had stayed at either of the previous schools, he could have built good programs but believed they would not have been as strong as the ones at Stanton. Joan had also taught in two other districts before coming to Stanton. She liked all three schools and communities in which taught, however, at one of the schools, there was no community involvement, and there was a noticeable difference when she came to Stanton. Joan explained, “The difference in moving to Stanton was the overall involvement of the community with the school.” As a graduate of Stanton High School, Dustin felt the community of Stanton provided a better opportunity for teachers to see students outside of school. The small community allowed him to see his students and talk to them when they were not in school. This provided for better student and staff relationships. Dustin said, “The community is why I came back to Stanton and why I loved it while I was here as a student.” These student-teacher relationships were important aspects of their desire to continue teaching in Stanton.

### **Student/Teacher Relationships**

The teachers felt the culture at Stanton High helped them create positive relationships with their students. Many of the teachers who participated in this study pointed to the mutual respect and trust that students and teachers have for one another. Joan felt their ability as teachers to get students to perform at high levels comes from the trust and respect that students and teachers have for each other. She said, “We trust students to do their part and hold them to a high standard and in return they respect us for that.” There is a culture of affecting students in a positive way and Stanton teachers believe it is continuing to get better. Bill credited respect throughout the building as a key component to the success of the school. He noted, “There is mutual respect between the kids and the teachers.” In addition to teaching at Stanton High,

Rachel teaches an education class at the local college that specifically talks about the benefits of trust. They discuss the benefits of having trust between administrators and teachers, teachers and teachers, and teachers and students. Rachel believes all three forms of those trust relationships exist at Stanton High, which in her estimation contributes to an enjoyable place to work and where students learn. She explained, “I think the trust in the building makes it a very pleasant work environment, an environment that most kids can learn in.” The respect students and teachers have for each other creates an environment where people get along with each other. For example, Connie said, “You don’t have a situation where the teacher and students are enemies here. There is a healthy respect and people get along.” The trust that exists between the students and staff at Stanton allows students to feel comfortable communicating with the teachers. Brenda shared, “The students trust the teachers enough to seek out advice from them.” This ease of communication also allows students to get to know the teachers, which showed them the level of care and time the teachers put into their work. This encouraged students to get involved in school programs. Brenda added, “Students want to be in a program where they know that the person who is leading it is dedicated and driven.” Showing appreciation also helps to build trust with the students. Bill said, “There is a culture that the teachers like kids. They genuinely like kids.”

Another factor that contributed to the positive school culture at Stanton High was the communication between teachers and students. Teachers regularly communicate with students in the hallways between class periods. Ken shared, “We just flat communicate with our kids. I make it a point to talk to every student I walk by in the halls. I say good morning to them and expect them to say something back to me.” Consistent communication with students helped to build a culture where teachers are approachable and encourage students to interact with them.

Communicating with students on an informal basis was important because teachers knew what students did outside of their classroom. For example, Rachel said, “You can talk to them about a ballgame or the musical and that helps.” Communicating with students not only built relationships, it also helped with classroom management. If a student misbehaved in class, it was addressed through talking to the student and trying to build a relationship with him or her. Claire said, “If I find something of interest that we can talk about throughout the class time, it shows the student that we are on an even playing field and they find that this is an okay place to be.” Talking to students outside of class about what they are interested in helped to build relationships and increased students desire to learn in the classroom. To illustrate, Joan said, “If I have a relationship with a student, they are more likely to be engaged in what I am teaching them and are more willing to learn.”

### **Comfortable and Safe Environment**

The culture at Stanton High helped to produce an environment where teachers felt comfortable and safe. Rachel supported this thought by sharing her feelings about the people she interacts with between classes: “Anyone in the hallway is going to be pleasant to me.” Teachers felt safe at Stanton, which contributed to them wanting to be there. Bill shared, “If I had to worry about a student being disrespectful to me everyday or I was worried about my safety, I don’t know that I would stay here.” This sense of feeling safe and secure also applied to the students. Bill observed, “For a lot of our kids, this is the best place that they have to be so they show up early and they don’t want to leave.” The atmosphere at Stanton allowed students with different interests to appreciate each other. Joan noted, “Stanton has enough different activities that kids can be themselves and have friends that are in the play or on the football team. They mix together.” Teachers believed the students also felt appreciated. Joan explained, “At

Stanton, you feel appreciated and that what you do is important.” There was not an activity that was given priority treatment by teachers or students. Instead, there was equal support for all activities. Dave agreed, “There is not one specific area that people are concerned about. It is not like, for example, athletics is the only thing that people care about.”

### **Focus on Students**

The school culture at Stanton High promotes a focus on the students. The teachers worked hard to help students succeed. Teachers worked together to help promote this student-centered focus. Brenda indicated, “We work hard to make sure that each student has something they are successful at.” Stanton teachers did this by communicating with each other and learning about students’ strengths and talents. Brenda supported this by saying, “If they are not good singers, a coach may take them under their wing.” If students struggle, there is support in place to help them. Brenda added, “Academically, when a student needs help, there are means to provide it. It just doesn’t fall on the teacher.” One way this support happened was through Stanton’s Multi Tier System of Supports (MTSS) program, which provides a system of tiered interventions to help students. By working together to find students’ strengths and supports for their weaknesses, Stanton High was able to produce well-rounded graduates. Mark indicated, “You might find places that are better academically, athletically, or in the Arts but I don’t think there is any school that does a better job of melding all of that together.”

A strength of Stanton High was the emphasis put on students to be involved in multiple activities. Carl insisted, “I want our students to be involved with as much as they can, which may mean that they are here at 7:00 a.m. and leave at 11:00 p.m. when they get to be sophomores and juniors.” As students are pushed to become involved in multiple activities, they also know the teachers will be there to support them. Dave said, “There is a sense of ‘get out there and do the



best you can, we are going to support you.’ I find this fulfilling and like being a part of it.”

Teachers believed the number of highly successful programs in the school was a result of students being willing to participate in multiple activities. Dave shared, “As I watch students, they don’t just specialize in music, drama, or sports. Students keep busy and are involved in a lot of activities and I think that makes a difference.”

### **Faculty Work Ethic**

The culture at Stanton High also contributed to a strong faculty work ethic. This meant teachers were willing to work hard and put in time to help make the students and programs at Stanton successful. When a new staff member is hired, they learned that message by watching their peers. Mark said, “If you come in here from another place, you are expected to carry your weight. Everybody else is doing it so you either get on board or you get out. It’s the culture.” Teachers at Stanton were expected to be dedicated to what they were doing, which included feeling what they were doing was important. Lonnie commented, “You have to believe that it is important for the students and be willing to put in the time that it takes for you to bring the students to the level that you want them to be at.” These teachers believe teachers have to want to be there and be willing to work hard, or they should not be in the education profession and certainly not at Stanton High School. Lonnie claimed, “We shouldn’t keep teachers here who are not willing to work. That is not good for our kids.” Because they have such strong programs at Stanton, students have many options when trying to decide what they want to participate in. Consequently, if teachers did not work hard to make their program successful, students are not going to want to be a part of it. Brenda commented, “The kids can choose from a whole buffet of really successful programs and I don’t think the kids are going to be attracted to something that is not successful.”

## **School Leadership**

Leadership from administration was important to the teachers at Stanton. They felt the building principal did a good job of creating a culture of learning by maintaining discipline in the school. Ken commented, “The principal handles discipline and that keeps me motivated.” Bill shared a similar feeling, “I don’t worry about discipline. That is why I have probably stayed in teaching and have never really thought about leaving.” Carl also agreed and made the statement, “When students need disciplined, the principal needs to be stern and help you out. I have always got that help and that is maybe the overriding reason why I have made it.” Supportive school leadership contributed to teachers remaining at the school.

The teachers at Stanton also felt the building administrator treated them as professionals by allowing them flexibility to teach in the manner in which they are comfortable. They were appreciative of their administrator for not interfering with or questioning their professional decisions. For example, Joan said, “The administration trusts us to do our job. It gives us the freedom to just focus on our teaching without wondering who is looking over our shoulder.” Bill also felt that way, “The principal gives us the freedom to try new stuff and take risks.” Betsy supported the same thought by saying, “The administration trusts the employees to do their job and knows that the teachers are going to create something good.”

Some of the teachers appreciated the willingness of the principal to take time to visit with them when they had ideas about their classroom or needed help in some area. Lonnie said, “The principal was good for me in my young teaching days just to sit down and talk with to figure out how to handle a discipline issue or something else. He was just very open and enthusiastic.” Jill agreed that the administration at Stanton promotes communication with the teachers. “I feel more comfortable at Stanton than any other school I have taught in having a conversation with my

principal.” Even if she and the principal did not always agree, she still felt heard. She explained, “I can go express my feelings to the administration. Even if they don’t make changes based on what I am telling them, I feel like they are truly listening to what I have to say.”

Feeling supported by their administrator was important to the teachers at Stanton and was part of the reason they chose to stay. Mark said, “Support and administrative leadership are a huge part of our success at Stanton. Not having that is what I think leads a lot of teachers to leave the profession.” He expanded on the thought by saying, “If you don’t have support and you don’t have quality leadership, you’re not going to have success and if you don’t have success, you’re out the door.” Lonnie credited his tenure in teaching to the support he feels from administration. He said, “The support from the administration is a reason I have stayed here. Administrative support helped me want to stay in teaching.” Brenda also felt supported by administration at Stanton, as she noted, “I think our administration supports us and listens to us.” Joan made similar comments about being supported by the administration at Stanton, “There is tremendous support from the administration.” She added, “At Stanton, I just feel that I am supported. The principal may meet with me and tell me that a parent doesn’t like what I am doing, but that they appreciate and support what I am doing.” She did not feel this same support at another district that she taught in. “The administration supports me in my class, curriculum, and coaching. That is probably the biggest difference between Stanton and the previous district I taught in.”

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to describe why teachers at Stanton High School remained in teaching and their dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching throughout their career. The design of the research was to discover the teacher's core experiences for remaining in teaching and identify their dreams for a teaching environment that would help them to remain in teaching throughout their career. The study used the theoretical perspectives of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and rural community culture to examine the data. AI identifies positive experiences and works to increase the number of positive experiences by creating more of them. Organizations often take the approach of trying to define problems and make improvements by using a problem-solving approach. By investigating the good things happening within the organization, they are able to problem solve by looking at positive actions instead of negative ones. Rural community culture shows the importance of the relationship between the community and school in the retention of teachers. Every rural community has a distinctive culture, with norms and values that can differ from urban areas. Within rural communities, there is a need for a strong relationship between the community and school. This relationship can have an impact on the retention of teachers. Teachers are more likely to stay at a school when they feel connected to the community.

The Discovery and Dream phases of the AI 4D cycle were used to bring out the positive core experiences of the teachers selected for the study. Through the Discovery phase, teachers were able to share their positive experiences at Stanton. The Dream phase allowed them to provide information about what the organization could be and how that could affect their length of stay in the district.

## **Conclusions**

Findings from this study were examined through the lens of rural community culture and Appreciative Inquiry. Living in a rural community can be beneficial for teachers because the cost of living is often less than in urban areas. Rural communities put a priority on supporting the school system. The school system can be the main communication hub for the entire community. It is a place where people gather, not only to attend activities, but also to visit and develop and maintain friendships. As people gather at the school, they are also able to build relationships with the teachers.

Appreciative Inquiry uses five principles which were useful for further analyzing the data from this study; the a) constructionist principle, b) simultaneity principle, c) poetic principle, d) anticipatory principle, e) positive principle. Chapter five will identify conclusions of the study by using these AI principles along with the rural community culture perspective.

### **Constructionist Principle**

The constructionist view allows people to create what is real in the world to them through words, conversations, and stories (Barrett & Fry, 2005). As study participants share their stories, they are able to generate ideas of what they appreciate about their jobs and what could be better. The constructionist principle encourages a collaborative environment that helps people to construct and understand options for improvement (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). This process is strengthened because people in rural communities tend to use similar terminology when they communicate with each other. The words used to describe personal experiences then help the researcher to interpret and guide what stands out as positive aspects in the lives of people in these rural settings (Barrett & Fry, 2005).

The constructionist principle helped to define the role of many factors as they related to teacher retention at Stanton. The teachers at Stanton shared many positive feelings about their rural school and community that were evident during the gathering and analysis of the data. These positive feelings were observed as they spoke about the teaching profession as it related to school culture, family benefits, relationships, coaching, and job satisfaction.

**School culture.** Stanton provided a positive school culture that promoted interaction between teachers and students. Teachers frequently communicate with students both in and out of the classroom. This appealed to teachers and was the type of environment they preferred both professionally and personally. Teachers talk to students in the hallways between classes and this consistent effort helps produce a comfortable environment for both the adults and students. Stanton promotes a school climate that is positive and has a high level of faculty and student engagement. The teachers and students communicate in a positive way that creates an enjoyable atmosphere. This communication happens not only at school, but also out in the community. The small size of the community allows students to see their teachers at places other than the school. Some attend the same church or have parents that socialize with their teachers outside of the school day. By communicating with students and showing interest in their lives and activities, teachers were able to connect with their students in different ways. Many of the teachers who participated in this study appreciated the mutual respect and trust the students and teachers have for each other. This helps to create an atmosphere where students are challenged by teachers to work hard and as a result, achieve at high levels. This contributes to an enjoyable work place and a safe environment for the teachers and students.

A factor affecting teacher retention is student behavior. Teachers in districts with a higher rate of negative student behaviors are less satisfied with their jobs (Stockard & Lehman, 2004).

The teachers at Stanton did not share any concerns about negative student behavior. In contrast, Stanton teachers liked the fact that they did not have to deal with students who were disrespectful, which might lead to challenging working conditions. Although difficult teaching conditions was a factor influencing teacher attrition in rural communities discussed in the literature review, this was not a factor in the Stanton school district.

Often times, in rural settings, the school and community depend on each other for survival. The school may be the largest employer in some small rural communities. In small schools, many students participate in activities, which in turn brings adults from the community to the school to watch the activities. This support from the community can also promote communication between the school and community. Rural communities allow for parents to have an increased level of involvement in the education of their children (Bauch, 2001). The community of Stanton had a distinctive rural culture that promoted the school and the teachers who worked there, which helped to increase the retention of these veteran teachers.

Being supported and liking the people you work with can make up for some other challenges in rural schools such as having to teach more subjects. Teachers in rural schools are often required to instruct a variety of subjects in order to help cover the classes offered on the schedule (Neill, 2006). A lot of teacher attrition is a result of teachers migrating to a different school with better resources and higher achieving students (Greenlee & Brown, 2009). However, this was not the case in Stanton because teachers are supplied with the resources they need. Also, the teachers at Stanton deal with students who are high achieving or for the most part, are willing to work and improve their achievement level. There is a culture at Stanton where teachers and students work together, which creates an environment that leads to students learning at a high level.

Teachers in small rural schools are sometimes required to teach multiple subjects which can be challenging and can lead to them leaving the teaching profession (McClure & Reeves, 2004). The teachers at Stanton did not discuss the number of subjects they were required to teach. They also did not give any examples of having to teach in an area where they were not certified. They did not express any concerns or frustrations in this area. In effect, they were highly satisfied with their teaching responsibilities at Stanton High School.

**Family benefits.** These veteran teachers appreciated their community and their job, which was a result of benefits they enjoyed from being a teacher in Stanton. They felt the Stanton school system was a good place for their own children to attend school. Being a small school allows their children to participate in many extra-curricular activities while also getting a quality education. They also felt the community provided a comfortable environment in which to raise their family. The school calendar was an incentive for the teachers in Stanton to stay in the education profession. Although many weeks during the year are longer than the standard 40-hour work week, there are also long breaks during the school year and the summer off which allows for quality family time.

**Sponsors.** Teachers at Stanton shared stories about positive role models they had when they were growing up. Many of these stories centered around coaches that had taught them when they participated in various activities. The teachers at Stanton looked up to these coaches as role models and wanted to be like that person when they grew up. Some shared stories about continuing to stay in touch with former coaches and seeking advice from them. These experiences contributed greatly to them wanting to become a teacher and it also pushed several of them to want to be a coach themselves. They wanted to create the same positive experience for their students that they had when they were growing up.



**Job satisfaction.** For these Stanton teachers, job satisfaction meant making a difference in the lives of their students. Sometimes this was done by teaching students a skill or sharing a talent with them. Watching students take knowledge and apply it through learning or constructing a project provided the teachers with job satisfaction. Students sometimes showed their appreciation immediately or sometimes it was years down the road when they came back to visit. Either way, this feeling of making a difference in the lives of their students kept them in the teaching profession and the teachers felt good about what they were doing. Some of the teachers did not think they could get the same feeling from another job or teaching in another school. Teachers who tend to remain in rural schools and are committed to the small community environment often have lived in small communities (Harris, 2001). The teachers at Stanton feel a deep connection to the community. For some, this is because they graduated from Stanton and returned to be a teacher. They understand the culture of the school and how it relates to the community. This connection was an important factor in their decision to continue to teach in the Stanton district. Other teachers moved to Stanton and also felt connected to the community and in return, are highly satisfied with their jobs. Schools can increase teacher retention by focusing more attention on increasing job satisfaction amongst their teachers (Bogler, 2001). In Stanton, the community involvement in the school has helped to increase teachers' job satisfaction.

Low pay, or compensation, was mentioned in the research as a reason why teachers leave the profession. Rural schools in particular tend to struggle with funding and as a result they offer lower salaries than urban and suburban school districts (Neill, 2006). This topic did not come up with any of the teachers from Stanton that participated in the study. They did not talk about their salary as a reason for remaining in teaching nor did they mention it would be a reason to change professions or change schools.

## **Simultaneity Principle**

The simultaneity principle refers to the process where inquiry and change happen simultaneously. The questions asked determine the answers given (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). At Stanton, incidents and actions that happened at the same time enhanced teachers' appreciation for their role as an educator. One example of this was their comparison of their current school situation to other jobs in education. At Stanton, teachers compared their role to what it would be like to be in another district and believed their teaching experience at Stanton was superior to that of other schools.

**Stanton compared favorably to other schools.** Teachers at Stanton felt their school was better than other schools due to the environment they work in daily. When comparing their school to others, they felt students behaved better at Stanton. They felt their school's culture promoted positive behaviors from their student body. Teachers felt this way after comparing long time Stanton students to those who were new to their school. Behaviors that might not have been a problem at another school were not allowed at Stanton. Teachers did not have to redirect students to achieve the desired behavior, instead it was an expectation promoted by the environment within Stanton. There is consistency throughout the school in how teachers deal with students and therefore students are well-behaved.

**Symbiotic relationship between community and school.** In rural settings, it is especially important to have a strong relationship between the school and community. In rural towns, the school and community need each other in order to survive. When the school is thriving, the community is also likely to be doing well. Small schools tend to benefit from the close relationship between the faculty and their feeling of being connected to the community (Barley & Beesley, 2007). In Stanton, there is a healthy relationship between the community and

school, which is shown in the support given to activities at the school. A high number of students participate in extra-curricular activities, which increases parent and community involvement in the school. Support of the participants and sponsors is appreciated and promotes a feeling of pride for both the school and community. In a small community, the school is often a gathering place for social events.

The teachers at Stanton also felt their community was better than other communities when comparing support for their school with their prior experiences. The Stanton community was involved with the school, which promotes a comfortable teaching environment at the school. The community is not only supportive of school activities, but also of the faculty and activity sponsors. This provided another reason for teachers to want to stay in teaching at Stanton. Being in a community and school that supports them reinforced their decision to continue teaching.

Close relationships among individuals and also between the community and school are common characteristics of smaller schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Stanton teachers are viewed as important figures in the community. They feel well-respected and appreciated for the work they do with the youth of the community. The teachers in return, enjoy teaching and living in the Stanton community. Teachers who develop a rootedness in the community benefit from understanding the intimate and public nature of teaching in a rural school (Harris, 2001). This seemed to be the case with the Stanton teachers.

### **Poetic Principle**

The poetic principle of AI relates to the overarching and repeating stories told by the teachers at Stanton that reaffirmed their motivation to remain in teaching. This principle says that people within any organization can increase their learning on any topic if they choose (Barrett &

Fry, 2005). Stanton teachers told many stories about the reasons they liked their jobs and wanted to continue teaching. By sharing these stories and listening to others share their stories, the teachers at Stanton were able to increase their knowledge about what was happening in their school. Stories that repeatedly emerged were the school's student-centered focus, effective administration, and ongoing success.

**Focus on students.** The focus on the students throughout the school demonstrated the teachers' desire to make a difference in their students' lives. The teachers strived to find a way for all students be successful and to find something each one was good at, whether it was academic or non-academic. In order for this to happen, teachers consistently communicated with each other to discuss how students were doing. There was awareness amongst the faculty when students were struggling. Sometimes this awareness was the result of a formal program such as their MTSS interventions. Other times it was a result of informal conversations between teachers specifically focused on individual students. Using formal and informal methods to help students be successful contributed to a relaxed atmosphere where the students enjoyed coming to school. Stanton teachers are focused on producing students who are well rounded and able to excel in both their academics and extra-curricular activities.

**Supportive administration.** The support of the teachers by the administration was another common story. Rural schools are more likely to keep new teachers when they have support from administrators and colleagues and have stable conditions in their work environment (Harris, 2001). Stanton administrators were described as being available and open-minded when teachers approached them on various topics. The teachers at Stanton felt their building principal and superintendent were interested in getting their opinion and hearing their ideas. The principal also involved teachers when they were looking to hire new staff at Stanton. The teachers

appreciated being involved in this process and felt it reinforced the thought that their opinions were valued. The administration also was a consistent part of communicating with the students to help them find areas where they could be successful. Teachers felt supported by administration and peers, which provided a consistent and enjoyable school to work in. Small schools can cultivate an organized environment, a positive climate, high levels of student engagement, and positive relationships between the school and community (Bauch, 2001). These factors contributed to retention of teachers in Stanton.

The research indicated that involving veteran teachers in the development and changing of school policies could have a positive impact on teacher retention. It is important for school leaders to listen to teachers to show them that their concerns, thoughts, and opinions are respected and valued (Williams & Kritsonis, 2007). The teachers at Stanton felt their thoughts and opinions were valued and respected by the administration, which led to greater satisfaction toward their job.

**Success breeds success.** The Stanton school district has a tradition of being successful in many areas. It has a reputation of being strong academically, which has transferred to success at the state level. Their forensic team has won numerous state championships. They also have excellent fine arts programs with outstanding participation in band and choir. Their athletic teams have also been successful and have done well at state-level competition. They believe students see this success and want to be a part of it.

The primary goal of the teachers at Stanton is to help their students be successful. This was done by encouraging students to work hard on their academic studies and to be involved in activities outside of the regular school day. When students were successful at school, they would try to attain success in other areas. The high level of student participation in activities promoted a

positive school culture. This strong desire to be successful was evident in both the school and community. It also applied to the teachers at Stanton. The strong tradition of academic programs and athletic teams create an environment teachers want to be a part of. It also motivates them to work hard at their jobs in order to sustain this success. They worked together while at the same time pushing each other to become better teachers. Veteran teachers worked to mentor younger teachers by modeling what their school and community expected from educators in the Stanton district. This not only helped the new teachers to adapt and be successful, it also energized and reaffirmed to the veteran teachers why they wanted to continue to work in the education profession.

### **Anticipatory Principle**

The anticipatory principle of AI maintains a group's vision of the future helps guide current behaviors and expectations within an organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2011). This vision of the future allows teachers to do their job and at the same time, focus their actions and behaviors toward the goals they want to achieve. This principle promotes the thought that one of the most potent methods for transforming and changing human systems is through the projection of their images of the future (Barrett & Fry, 2005). Throughout the study, teachers shared information about their personal experiences as a teacher and how it motivated them on a day-to-day basis, which in turn led to their long-term commitment to the education profession and desire to teach in Stanton.

**Personal experience.** The teachers shared stories about their experiences as students and how this gave them a vision of what they wanted to do when they became a teacher. Some of their memories were of experiences they did not have or get to do when they were a student and wanted to provide for their students. An example of this was Connie's experience growing up

attending a small school that did not provide music for the students on a daily basis. By looking forward, she was able to envision a future where she was teaching at a school that provided music class to students each day. Others shared the good things they remembered about growing up that they wanted to transfer to their students experience in school. An example was the opportunity to be a good role model for students just like they had when they were growing up. They could envision themselves being a good role model to their students and this motivated them to become a teacher. Teachers also liked the daily variety that comes with being a teacher. Dan initially went to college to join a profession that would require long hours working in a lab. He tried to imagine what it would be like to do that kind of routine work for a lot of years and ended up changing his mind and becoming a teacher.

**Community/school location.** The location of the school provided motivation for teachers to remain in their job. Some of the teachers told stories about working at other districts and looked ahead to some day becoming a teacher in Stanton. For some, it was for the opportunity to move closer to relatives. Sometimes it was for their family and other times it was to move closer to their spouse's family. The desire to find a job in a small, rural school was another reason being a teacher in Stanton was a good opportunity. They could think about what advantages they would have if they lived and worked in a small community and it impacted their decision to move to Stanton. Working and living in a small community helped them to avoid traffic filled commutes on their way to work each day. The opportunity to come back to the community where they went to college was another positive factor of teaching and staying in Stanton.

**Family.** Anticipating their own family needs was another important factor in the decision for the teachers at Stanton to remain in the education profession. As the teachers looked

ahead to raising their families, they liked the idea of being in Stanton. They felt the community was a great place to raise their children. Community involvement in the school made for a comfortable environment and also gave them the feeling it was a safe place. Working in the Stanton school system gave them an up close view of the education their own children would receive. Students are provided a well-rounded educational experience, which encouraged them to stay in Stanton and continue in the teaching profession. Carl said when he and his family initially moved to Stanton to be a teacher, they stayed because they liked the school and the job. After they had kids of their own, the focus of staying changed to wanting their kids to go to school in Stanton. Connie took it a step farther stating when her children get older and had families of their own, she would like for her grandchildren to attend Stanton.

Time for family is important to the teachers of Stanton. They put in many hours of work in the classroom and sponsoring activities outside of the school day. They look forward to the time they could spend with their families. The school calendar gives them time to do this in the summer and other school breaks. Even though many evenings are filled with school responsibilities and time away from their families, the teachers can look forward to blocks of personal time they will have on holidays and during the summer.

### **Positive Principle**

The positive principle states that organizations grow and are successful when they are exposed to conditions that use positive language and images, and promote excitement, caring, and hope (Barrett & Fry, 2005). Creating a positive image of their school and community is something the teachers at Stanton do on a continual basis. This positive image promotes pride in the employees of the Stanton school district and gives teachers a desire to continue in their



teaching job. Being positive around their students helps to keep students excited about going to school and gives teachers job satisfaction.

**Former teachers.** The teachers at Stanton have positive memories and images of teachers they had when they were growing up. They remember some of their teachers being great role models by how they organized their classrooms and balanced requiring students to learn with allowing them to have fun. For some, it helped them decide to become a teacher and for others it helped them to decide what subject they wanted to teach. Some of the former teachers who persuaded them to go into teaching impacted them in a positive way when they were not even in a classroom setting. For them, it was a coach or sponsor that got them excited about some day being a teacher. They respected these men and women and learned many life lessons from them. Some of the teachers at Stanton graduated and came back to be a teacher in the district. The positive memories they had played a big part in the decision to become a teacher and to remain in teaching.

**Fellow teachers.** Enjoying the people with whom they teach helps to create an environment where students and teachers can excel. The teachers at Stanton have a deep respect for one another and are committed to making a good name for the school and community of Stanton. They get along well with each other and are willing to help each other when needed. This feeling of teamwork within the walls of Stanton high school provides a positive work environment. Being a small school in a small community gives them the opportunity to see each other outside of the school day whether at church or at other community events. Although this could happen in larger districts, it happens often in Stanton. The teachers feel their peers enjoy what they are doing and want to be good teachers. There are many teachers at Stanton with long tenures in the district. Working together for a long period of time has helped the teachers to

develop strong relationships with each other. These relationships allow them to work together and communicate in a positive way. Even though many of the teachers have been there for a number of years, they are continually trying to improve on what they do so that they can provide the best learning experience for their students. They take pride in the subjects they teach and activities they sponsor, but at the same time, also respect what the other teachers are doing. Students are able to see the adults in the building working hard and working together and it serves as an excellent model for the students to follow. This comfort of working with people who are also friends and who have similar values provides job satisfaction, which helps lead to teacher retention.

**Role models.** Part of the culture at Stanton is the expectation that teachers will work hard and do whatever it takes to help their students. They take pride in the fact they put in long hours to work with the students at school. They believe that as they work hard, students will recognize this and in return want to work hard for them. Teachers put in time to make their programs successful, which then increases the desire for students to be a part of the program. There are high expectations for new staff. Teachers who came to Stanton and did not fit into this culture, did not stay long.

### **Implications**

The literature review of teacher retention in chapter two provided different reasons why teachers remain in teaching and also some reasons why they would choose to change professions. This section will address findings from the study as they relate to ways to increase teacher retention. It will focus on school/community relationships, student/teacher relationships, extra-curricular activities, administrative support, and geography in relation to teacher retention.

## **School/Community Relationships**

The findings from this study demonstrated there is a strong relationship between the community of Stanton and the school. They support each other and this helps to promote a positive culture. The school is a source of pride for the community and also provides a place for social gatherings. These interactions help to promote a bond between the teachers and community members. The teachers at Stanton are more likely to continue teaching there because they feel connected to the community. It can be difficult for new teachers that move into the community who do not feel like they fit in. A key component of retention in a rural school is having a feeling of being rooted in the community, which can help counter feelings of isolation (McClure & Reeves, 2004). The teachers at Stanton who moved into the community felt welcomed and part of the community, which played a major role in not only increasing teacher retention within the district but to the teachers' longevity. Administrators, school board members, and policy makers need to take these factors into consideration when trying to increase teacher retention in their schools and communities. Support between the school and community can strengthen relationships that in return, can increase teacher retention. It is also important to create opportunities for community members and teachers to interact in order to develop relationships, which will increase teacher retention. Teachers who feel connected to the community are more likely to want to stay.

Rural-specific literature has noted one factor that can have a positive effect on teacher retention is for them to feel that they are established in the community (McClure & Reeves, 2004). This was the case in Stanton and helped them to achieve better results in hiring and keeping teachers compared to research in rural schools where the number of highly qualified teachers is below average (Monk, 2007). There are a small number of well prepared teachers

who are interested in going to an isolated community in a rural area (Berry & Darling-Hammond, 2006). Other small, rural communities and schools can benefit from this study by understanding the impact that they can have on hiring and retaining quality teachers. Interacting with teachers at school and out in the community can help to build relationships that influence teachers to want to stay. Being deliberate in helping teachers feel comfortable in the place they choose to live can help small rural communities increase teacher retention in their school district.

### **Student/Teacher Relationships**

The relationship between teachers and students has an impact on teacher retention. When teachers are able to build strong relationships with their students, they have greater job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in their teaching job. This increased length of tenure in a district also helps them to build relationships with their students over a longer period of time, helping to strengthen relationships. These relationships can be with current or former students. One of the main factors involved in the job satisfaction and retention of teachers is a result of their relationships with both current and former students (Bogler, 2001). At Stanton, there was a continuity of relationships between the teachers and their mentors and the teachers who became mentors to students.

The teachers at Stanton work extremely hard to build positive relationships with their students. They communicate with their students during class, in the hallways, and outside of school. Teachers who do not build relationships with their students can become dissatisfied with their job and end up leaving the education profession. This study demonstrates the importance of promoting positive interactions between teachers and students on a daily basis. Doing so helps create a positive culture within the school and at the same time increases job satisfaction for the teachers, which leads to higher teacher retention. Administrators, school board members, and

policy makers should understand the important role that student relationships with their teachers play in teacher retention. Encouraging teachers to build relationships with their students in the classroom, during extra-curricular activities, and away from school, will increase the possibility of retaining more teachers.

### **Extra-Curricular Activities**

A large percentage of the students at Stanton participate in extra-curricular activities. This helps them to communicate and strengthen relationships with their teachers outside of the classroom. It also increases the number of parents and community members involved in the school. The community supports activities such as music programs, plays and musicals, forensics, and sports. Doing so helps promote an environment where the community is involved with the school and at the same time, teachers get to know community members, which contributes to job satisfaction and increased teacher retention. This study revealed that extra-curricular activities not only have a positive impact on students, but also on teachers. They provide a platform for teachers to get involved in activities outside of the school day while also having the opportunity to interact with members of the community. School districts can increase teacher retention by trying to get new teachers involved in helping to sponsor activity. This will increase their contact with students and also give them a different platform to interact with them on.

### **Administrative Support**

Teachers have a greater level of job satisfaction when they feel their principal maintains open lines of communication with them (Bogler, 2001). The principal is the main person who can influence the working conditions at school by improving the culture (Greenlee & Brown, 2009). In order for teachers to feel comfortable in their jobs, they need support from their

administrator. Teachers who do not feel supported by their administration are more likely to struggle to achieve success and end up changing professions (Berry & Darling-Hammond, 2006). The principal is a significant element in promoting a culture of open communication within their building. In order to reduce the number of teachers leaving the education profession, leaders must be efficient in promoting a collaborative culture, which promotes communication (Williams & Kritsonis, 2007).

The culture at Stanton promotes communication between teachers and administration. The teachers at Stanton feel they are supported by their administration. They felt there was an open line of communication with administration that allowed them to be successful in their classrooms. Teachers appreciated the fact that they could visit with administrators about new ideas they had for their classroom and were encouraged to try them out. They were allowed freedom in their classroom to teach in a style that was comfortable to them. The administration at Stanton has been successful in creating a collaborative culture that promotes communication between teachers. The teachers at Stanton are also very comfortable collaborating with their peers. They regularly communicate about students, curriculum, and extra-curricular activities.

Schools can benefit by understanding the positive role that the principal can play in teacher retention. It is important for the building administrator to create a culture that promotes communication between the teachers and the principal. Teachers who are comfortable visiting with their principal may become more satisfied with their job and in turn, stay at the school where they are teaching. Districts can leverage this possible increase in teacher retention by making district goals that encourage and require administrators to meet with new teachers on a regular basis. This would help to strengthen the relationship between new teachers and their administrator while at the same time, increase the possibility of the teacher staying in the district.

## **Geographic Location**

Small, rural communities with fewer than 2,500 residents, comprise 29% of the public schools in the United States (Jimerson, 2005). Twenty-one percent of public school teachers, which is over 500,000 total, teach in these rural schools (Jimerson, 2005).

The location of Stanton played a part in teachers relocating and staying there. Stanton is located fairly close to larger cities, which helps with the shopping and recreational needs of the residents. Wichita is seventy-three miles away and Hutchinson is twenty-eight. Some teachers came to the district because they had family in Stanton or married someone who had family in the Stanton community. The rural community also allows teachers to commute a short distance to work without having to deal with traffic on a daily basis.

A large number of teachers choose to teach at schools close to where they grew up (Berry, 2004). Some of the teachers graduated from Stanton and wanted to come back and be a teacher because they liked the area and community.

Understanding the importance of geography in relation to teacher retention can assist schools in hiring and retaining teachers. It is important to understand the needs of teachers who would move to the area in order to provide them with a positive transition to their new community and school. It is also important to note that many close knit rural communities, including Stanton, tend to lack diversity. The population of Stanton is made up of 90.4% Caucasian, 4.3% Hispanic, 2.3% African-American, 1.8% multiple race, .6% American Indian, and .6% Asian (U.S. HomeTownLocator, 2015). Although the homogeneity of the community appealed to teachers, the lack of diversity can create a closed and limiting culture of the school and community.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions

1. What are some of the reasons that you chose to be a teacher?
2. Why did you choose to teach at Stanton High School?
3. What are some things that have motivated you to remain in the education profession?
4. What are some of the reasons why you have remained at Stanton High School?
5. Please describe some of the positive thoughts, experiences, or feelings that you have about Stanton High School.
6. What are some specific factors that have contributed to these positive thoughts/experiences/feelings?
7. What are the things that make you excited to come to work?

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

1. Looking at your entire experience in working as a teacher, do you remember a time when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most excited about your work – a time when it all came together?

2. What made it exciting?

3. Who else was involved?

4. Describe how you felt about it.

Let's talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself, about the nature of your work as a teacher and about being part of Stanton High School.

5. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself as a person and as a member of the Stanton faculty?

6. When you are feeling best about your work in your classroom or in other responsibilities of your job, what is it that you value most? Describe what is happening?

7. What do you value about Stanton High School?

8. What is the most important thing your teaching job has contributed to your life? To your school? To the community?

9. What do you experience as the core factors that give life to your job as a teacher? Give some examples of how you experience those factors.

10. What three wishes would you make to heighten the vitality and satisfaction of your job as a teacher?





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## Appendix C

### *Qualitative Case Study of Teacher Retention in a Rural Secondary School Consent Form*

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a study of teacher retention in a rural secondary school. Wichita State University (WSU) is conducting a field study in partnership with Stanton, USD to facilitate a qualitative case study with its certified staff. I hope to understand the perspectives of veteran teachers in a small rural district by discovering core positive experiences for remaining in teaching and identifying their dreams for a teaching environment that would help them to remain in teaching throughout their career. The research will be conducted in USD Stanton during the Spring semester of the 2012-13 school year.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected as a participant in this study because you met the qualifications of being a highly qualified tenured teacher who has been in the district for at least five years. There will be 12-14 teachers involved in this study. If there are more than eight teachers who meet the criteria, they will be purposively selected based on the number of years taught, subject taught, and gender.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview to provide information about your positive core experiences for remaining in teaching and your dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain your desire to remain in teaching throughout your career. Participants will be asked to bring a document or artifact from the school or community to the individual interviews. Documents from Sterling High School could include district policies related to hiring and retention, teacher handbooks, student handbooks, and yearbooks. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group with all study participants. Interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded.

**Discomfort/Risks:** There are no known risks or discomforts, physical, psychological, or social, connected to this study.

**Benefits:** The research will provide information about the positive core experiences of teachers and their dreams for a teaching environment that would sustain their desire to remain in teaching throughout their career. The study will provide information to help increase teacher retention.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Information from the interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded. Data will be kept in a secure location and will be disposed of after completion of the research. No one other than my advisor and myself will have access to the raw data.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the following people: Scott Friesen, 404 S. Main, Inman, KS 67546, 620-585-6441, [sfriesen@usd448.com](mailto:sfriesen@usd448.com) or Dr. Jean Patterson at 316-978-6392. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate in the following activities:

- Semi-Structured Interview
- Focus Group

You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Request consent form can be returned electronically to [sfriesen@usd448.com](mailto:sfriesen@usd448.com) or by fax to 620-585-2797.