

Rural Teacher Well-being in Nova Scotia

by Michelle Hoffmann (*shelher*), Educator

Teacher well-being is a key facet of education systems yet is often overlooked in the race to optimize student achievement. As a classroom teacher at a small school in Cumberland County, I have experienced the additional impacts of rural life on well-being. I recently completed a Master of Education (Sustainability, Creativity & Innovation) degree through Cape Breton University and chose to focus on this important topic for my thesis. The guiding research question was: *What are the well-being experiences of teachers in rural Nova Scotia?*

Eleven full-time licensed teachers living and working in rural areas of the province (30+ min drive to the nearest town of 10,000+ people) were interviewed in April 2024, providing a wealth of narrative data. These interviews were powerful emotional conversations in which I was honored to take part.

Participants in this study described **negative well-being experiences**, frequently referencing states of burnout, stress, overwhelm, and exhaustion. These educators described not feeling valued, respected, listened to, or like they were trusted as professionals. The rural teachers I spoke with questioned their professional worth and often thought about leaving the classroom (if they hadn't already) or retiring early.

Four key themes emerged from the data as influences on rural teacher well-being: **Unsupportive Administrators/System, Unachievable Workload, Poor Student Well-being, and Lack of Access to Well-being Supports**. All teachers in Nova Scotia would experience strain from an unsupportive education system, being asked to do more with less, witnessing student struggles, and trying to sustain well-being in our current economic/political climate. Living and working in a rural environment magnified the well-being effects of the last three themes, to varying degrees, for the teachers interviewed.

An **Unsupportive Education System** was described through a

lack of systemic cohesiveness, negativity from higher ups, pressure/guilt around taking needed sick days, unsupported initiatives, lack of discipline/consequences, poor school climate, and deteriorating relationships within the system. Rural-specific facets of this theme did not emerge from the data, but I wonder what a larger data set may reveal. For example, rural principals tend to have spent less (if any) time as vice principals and may lack the training needed for the crucial jobs of setting school climate and adequately

managing discipline. My rural school is not allotted a vice principal position, placing larger responsibility on the principalship as the sole decision maker.

Many contributors to an **Unachievable Workload** are non-rural specific, including increased data reporting requirements, insufficient prep time, and job demands exceeding one's ability to achieve work-life balance. Rural factors for this theme were class complexity and highly variable teaching assignments. Teachers at rural schools often have multiple different courses over a variety of grade bands and are assigned split classes like Math 11 Academic/Pre-Calculus 12/ Math 12 IPP (student's ability around a Grade 2 level).

Participants lamented that students are not ready to learn in classroom environments and require more support than is currently available. Rurality enhanced **Poor Student Well-being** through similar accessibility issues facing teachers (see next theme). In rural spaces, teachers gap-fill for a lack of trained mental health professionals. Interestingly, rurality sometimes had a positive impact on teacher well-being in this study via strengthened student-teacher relationships.

Lack of Access to Well-being Supports was the theme most notably impacted by rural living. While all teachers are likely to note a lack of time/money and sub shortages influencing their pursuit of well-being enhancement, rural living compounds these factors and adds new considerations. Distance to services, lack of



access to health care, lack of fitness facilities, and public perception negatively influenced rural teacher well-being in this study.

I doubt that the well-being experiences and themes described herein are revelatory to any educator in this province. One of the interview participants summed it up as, “*We just have a very broken system, and it seems like nobody is listening.*” Considering the budget cuts and subsequent staffing changes we are about to face, I worry about the continued well-being of my colleagues. Rural schooling environments, with their unique additional complexities, will suffer and the teachers sustaining them are sure to be hit hard.

Strong social networks emerged as one of the main well-being supports throughout the interviews. The rural teachers I spoke with discussed not only the importance of friends and family on their mental health, but also coworkers and students. Rural schools have unique challenges but also unique strengths: we know our students and coworkers well. If I had any advice from this research, it would be to encourage rural teachers to lean on one another as we continue to push for the changes needed in our education system.

Michelle Hoffmann has taught for eight years at Parrsboro Regional High School. She is interested in transforming the education system to better support well-being for all. If you would like to learn more about the research shared in this article, her thesis can be found here: <https://cbu.scholaris.ca/items/1cc6b089-1778-47f0-8e70-e704deee35b9>.