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CAMPUS ADDITION: Rhonda Bishop and Diana Piccolo are co-directors of the new Center for Rural Education on the campus of Missouri State University.

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MSU launches Center for Rural Education

Establishing a teacher pipeline is among program goals



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Tim Ryan: Dallas County is starting to hire college students as long-term substitute teachers.

With roughly 70% of the 500 school districts in the state identified as rural, Missouri State University has launched a program officials say is the first of its kind in the state aimed to organize and promote rural school outreach and partnerships.

A grand opening was held June 9 for the Center for Rural Education, which is housed at MSU's College of Education in Hill Hall. The program is led by

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co-directors Diana Piccolo and Rhonda Bishop, who both work in the university's Department of Childhood Education. Piccolo, a 14-year university employee, is a professor in the department, while Bishop has worked since 2018 with MSU, serving as a clinical assistant professor.

"This has been an idea long in the making," Piccolo said, noting the MSU Board of Directors approved the program in December. "We've known that need has been there, and so we're just very excited to be able to help get it off the ground and get into the schools and help the students, teachers and the districts."

MSU officials say the center's mission is to establish partnerships and programs to identify, prepare and support quality school professionals for all rural students and school districts across the state. Its goals include establishing a teacher pipeline, retaining and supporting rural teachers, and securing external funding to promote research and advocacy.

Bishop said the timeline to tackle the center's goals is yet to be established, but a primary initial plan is to visit with rural school districts and learn more of the challenges they're facing. "We're letting community partners and schools know that we're out there, wanting to listen and see what their needs are and how we can help," Piccolo said. "That's part of the framework for getting this started."

High teacher turnover and a shortage of educators is an issue that school districts have dealt with for years, Bishop said.

"We know that in rural schools – and any schools at this point – teacher recruitment and retention are probably the two top areas that school districts are struggling with," she said, noting pay remains the primary factor why teachers move to other school districts. "We're looking to find creative ways to support those rural schools."

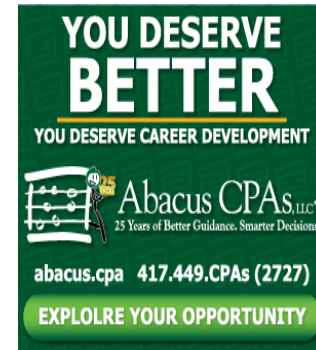
Navigating struggles

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education noted 71,713 teachers were employed during the 2021-22 school year and the retention rate was 88.1%. The 11.9% turnover rate for teachers without replacements is nothing new to the state, as DESE reported the state has exceeded the 8% national average for the past seven years.

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The annual turnover rate is relatively consistent at 15% for the Dallas County R-1 School District, said Superintendent Tim Ryan, who has been in the role for eight years. Currently, the district is fully staffed heading into summer, he said. There are 340 employees, and half of them work on the teacher's salary schedule, which also includes counselors and instructional coaches, among others.

"We're not a small school district; we're just rural, meaning we have 400 square miles of land area. We're just big geographically," he said, noting district student enrollment exceeds 1,900.

With a district office in Buffalo, Ryan said it's around a 25-minute drive from Springfield, so the commute isn't too bad for district employees. The district also will have a higher base teacher salary of \$39,500 for this next school year.

Statewide, a baseline pay raise to \$38,000 from \$25,000 is expected for all districts as part of the \$49 billion budget awaiting signature from Gov. Mike Parson.

"We're fortunate because financially we're very solvent, so we're able to pay more than some of the small rural school districts around us," Ryan said. "But we're not able to pay near as much as Springfield because we don't have that same tax base."

In Springfield, teacher pay increased last year, according to the Springfield Public Schools website. Starting pay for teachers jumped to \$41,544 following a 4% cost of living increase.

"If someone loves the working environment they are in, enjoys the people they work with and are treated well by the people they work for, for a lot of people it sometimes still comes down to money," Ryan said of why teachers leave one school district for another. "A lot of times, the only reason they go to a bigger district is because they live there."

To address hiring needs, he said Dallas County R-1 began looking last year at those interested in working in the classroom before they started student teaching, which is typically in the last semester of the senior year in college.

"We're hiring them as a long-term substitute and having them do their student teaching for us," he said. "That locks them in, in some ways, and we can offer them a contract when they finish their student teaching."

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The strategy has led the district to hire five teachers in the past year, Ryan said.

“We’re able to work with those student teachers and mold them into what our expectations are for staff members,” he said. “That side of it has been helpful.”

Welcome aid

Ryan said he welcomes the new MSU program as another aid to rural schools, particularly when helping to build and sustain the teacher pipeline.

“Any efforts that colleges and universities are willing to do will be helpful for us,” he said.

Like Dallas County R-1’s strategy to reach students earlier, thinking differently is necessary for teacher attraction and retention, Bishop said.

“We have to think of different and unique ways to make that happen,” she said. “Part of the university’s piece in that is to see what we can do to support those efforts.”

The program also seeks to increase the number of pathways and accelerated learning opportunities for rural high school students to consider teaching as a career.

“We want to promote ongoing mentoring and professional development of teachers in the rural schools, especially in their first three years of teaching,” Piccolo said.

The program’s co-directors currently are its lone staff, but they expect administrative support will be hired by the fall.

“It won’t be on a full-time basis at first, but we will have some,” Bishop said, adding the number of employees and the university’s financial investment in the program is still being determined. “We’re working to scale it up as we move forward.”

Their new roles will be in addition to continuing teaching duties.

“We’re given some course release to work on the center, but right now we’re going to do both,” Bishop said.

The schedule commitment is currently undefined, Piccolo said, as it will take time to determine the workload to be effective.

“You’re going to need a year to really know how much time it’s going to take,” Bishop said.



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She said the program initially will be funded through the College of Education budget, but part of the plan will be to seek alternative sustained funding sources, such as donors.

“It is our goal that within three years we’ll be financially independent. We’re looking into writing grants and sponsorships,” Piccolo said. “That’s part of our to-do list to get the center up and running.”

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