

Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: A Principals' Fight Against Traditional Educator Pathways to Staff an Underperforming School in the Rural South

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Abstract: *Since every student succeeds act (2015) granted states flexibility in teacher credentialing policies, school and system leaders across the United States have been leveraging this flexibility to address the classroom teacher shortage through innovative staffing strategies. Marcus, a young middle school principal hired to turn around an underperforming school in the rural south, struggled to staff his school fully at the start of his 1st year as principal. Throughout this case study, Marcus navigated preparing, recruiting, and retaining teachers through an innovative partnership that enabled him to train prospective teachers on his campus. Marcus's leadership provides a view into a nontraditional solution for staffing schools. The purpose of this case study was to encourage school leaders to pursue nontraditional solutions to staffing. Given the limited evidence base for nontraditional solutions to school staffing, this case benefits graduate students studying education policy, principalship preparation, and educational administration who wish to develop innovative models for school staffing. Furthermore, this case offers valuable insights for leaders who face challenges in staffing schools in under-resourced communities, similar to the one highlighted here. Marcus' approach, encapsulated by the famous battle cry, "ain't gonna let nobody turn me around," serves as a beacon of hope for school and district leaders.*

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Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), the nation's policy agenda for governing schools, forced states to adopt policies to increase teacher preparedness and placed tremendous strains on the educator workforce in the United States. For example, states were required to ensure their teachers met the highly qualified provision through the state's licensure systems. Therefore, most state laws required educators to pass a licensure exam, in addition to their teacher preparation program, before being eligible to teach. States undertook extreme measures to increase the share of qualified teachers in their state. Many states would not allow an educator a credential without having passed a set of exams—if they did receive a license, it was a temporary one, which meant they were also paid differently. This highly qualified

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teacher provision and other NCLB (2001) policies came with a great deal of consequence. Under resourced schools experienced much of that consequence, and they already struggled to attract, recruit, and retain quality teachers. For this case study, I considered the impact innovative staffing efforts on the rural South—a place already struggling to find teachers—that took the largest hit because of the shift in policy. Consequently, some 20 years after NCLB, teacher shortages have been exacerbated, and much can be attributed to educator quality provisions in the NLCB, which aimed to rationalize teacher professional standards uniformly.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), a highly qualified teacher has a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competence in all subject knowledge they teach. States were left with implementation of the highly qualified teacher provision, varying from state to state and region to region. Although well intentioned, this definition increased the number of assessments educators must take in rural communities before entering the teaching profession, which has contributed to an already strained teacher pipeline (Jimerson et al., 2003). This phenomenon has left many classrooms across the United States without a teacher, which became especially true in hard-to-staff schools—most often with students who have been racially minoritized (Ingersoll, 2001).

Although a great deal of attention can be given to the NCLB's (2001) role in exacerbating this issue, McClure and Reeves (2004) also found other factors (e.g., low wages, geographic and social isolation, difficult working conditions) contributing to the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in the rural South. Considering these challenges, school leaders in the rural South serving in underserved communities struggled to find classroom teachers; however, many of these issues were not germane to schools in the rural South. Many of these issues conflate an already-pressed system, meaning leadership is needed to bring about nontraditional methodologies for staffing schools. March, a young middle school principal, provided that example.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore innovative strategies in school staffing within under-resourced communities. The case study method is particularly well-suited for this research, as it allows for an in-depth examination of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of a specific school leader—Marcus—as he navigates the complexities of staffing in a rural Southern school district. The case study design provides rich, contextualized insights that are crucial for understanding the nuanced and multifaceted nature staffing rural schools.

Case Selection

The case was purposively selected based on its relevance to the research questions and its potential to provide significant insights into the challenges of staffing in under-resourced

educational settings. The selected case, a rural school district in the Southern United States, was chosen due to its long-standing issues with teacher shortages and its innovative approach to addressing these challenges. The leader at the center of this case, Marcus, (pseudonym) was identified as a key informant due to his role in implementing and advocating for creative staffing solutions within his district.

Author's Role as Participant

In this study, the author was not only a researcher but also a participant-observer. The author's involvement in the case provided a unique insider perspective, contributing to a deeper understanding of the context and the intricacies of the staffing strategies being implemented. This dual role as both participant and observer offered a comprehensive view of the case, enabling the author to document and analyze the lived experiences of those involved in the staffing efforts. However, the author also remained cognizant of the potential biases that could arise from this dual role and took deliberate steps to mitigate them, as outlined in the trustworthiness section.

Data Collection/ Analysis

Data for this case study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, participant observation, and reflective journaling. The data collected were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and concepts related to staffing challenges and innovative solutions.

The Context

Marcus's school, Amtrak Way, located in Good Hope County (pseudonyms for the actual school and county), was once known as one of the most poverty-stricken communities in the United States. The median household income in Amtrak Way was \$27,153 for a family of four at the time of this case study, meaning a large number of citizens fell below or on the federal poverty line. Conversely, Amtrak Way became known for its rich history during the Civil Rights Movement. The small town of fewer than 1,500 persons, over 75% Black, struggled to maintain its population and attract newcomers, especially business owners. As a result, the county school system, Good Hope County School District, which included an elementary, middle, and high school, struggled to attract teachers to the local school district.

In addition to the county's population issues, students have underperformed in all core subjects: reading, math, and science. In fact, the only elementary school was under state takeover for many years before becoming successful. Furthermore, local education was

squarely divided along the lines of race, as 97% of students attending schools in Good Hope County School District, the public school system, were Black. Conversely, all but a handful of the white students in the county attended the private school, Tree Academy, which once was used as a segregation academy after the federal court ruled in 1969 that Good Hope County School District officials were maintaining an unconstitutional de jure racially segregated school system. In a post *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) era, this was especially impactful because many Black teachers were dismissed for integration, leaving schools filled with white teachers. However, when white families decided they did not want their children attending these schools, they took them and their teachers to Tree Academy. Since then, Good Hope County School District struggled to recover the Black teachers lost some 60 years ago.

Recruitment and retention of teachers has been especially troubling given Good Hope County's basic living amenities—the only local grocery store was closed for many years. When March began his principalship, four of the middle school's 24 teachers had the proper credential for what they were teaching. To make matters worse, those four teachers were the only credentialed teachers the prior academic year. Conflated with these challenges were the state's low salary for teachers, a stringent model for teacher credentialing, and years of underperformance from students. Thus, Marcus's work to develop a nontraditional model for school staffing was necessary to grapple with several challenges standing in the way of his students getting a quality education.

Case Narrative

Marcus was hired by the local superintendent with a clear focus on raising student achievement. After years of dismal performance on state assessments, the newly minted superintendent wanted change for all her schools, particularly this one school where students often failed. Many local school board members ran on a platform to change the culture of the middle school. For many years, parents were frustrated that they would have to send their children to Marcus's school. In many cases, parents did not send their children to the school; they would either move out of the county or commute.

Many parents faced the challenge that their children had attended the local elementary school, just 2 miles up the road, which had greatly improved its academics and culture from prior years before the state took over the elementary school. That elementary school had been in a similar situation just years before, and the district partnered with an outside organization to transform the elementary school. They faced similar changes that Marcus would be up against—hiring certified educators to improve the school.

Although Marcus was aware of the challenges he would face in improving the school, he knew little about the staff when he was hired. He did know the school had been labeled "D" or "F" for many years. Furthermore, his school had gone through at least five principals in the last 7 years, with him as the fifth principal. He knew these facts. He did not know that many of the 24 teachers who had worked in the school previously were not certified teachers. Further,

the handful of teachers who were certified would not return the next year.

Following the local board meeting when Marcus was hired, students and school staff organized a protest to keep their previous principal who had done work to improve the overall student experience through course offerings and other efforts; however, their protest was not successful. The newly minted superintendent continued forward and brought Marcus in to begin the work of school transformation. Immediately, Marcus met with each teacher to learn their commitment to staying the next year. In these one-on-one meetings, he learned 14 teachers would not be allowed to return because they either did not hold an educator's license or were not on a path to acquire an educator's license.

After holding meetings with the previous year's staff, Marcus quickly started recruiting newly minted teachers from schools of education and programs like Teach for America, which aimed to place high-capacity teachers into underserved schools, to fill the 14 teaching spots. Marcus soon realized those programs could not provide him with enough teachers to staff his school. So, he began meeting with the former teachers to find out if they wanted to obtain their educators' licenses. He learned many of them wanted to do so and were from the community. Marcus began to determine the requirements for an alternate teacher's license in the state and started to get teachers into those programs to earn their educator's license.

While attending a professional learning experience with a private university, Marcus met the dean of a local school of education. At every meeting, Marcus searched for solutions to address the teacher shortage. The dean noticed this determination in Marcus and offered to help Marcus find a solution. Like Marcus, the dean was a former superintendent and principal who had a passion for addressing the state's teacher shortage. After talking with Marcus, the dean and Marcus agreed to find a solution to the problem. Marcus then knew about the state's opportunity to credential teachers through an alternate program that would both shorten the time it would take to become an educator and ensure the candidates were prepared. The policy change came in the wake of congress providing more flexibility to states, arguing they no longer needed to meet the "highly qualified" status through the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015).

Marcus and the Dean saw opportunity to make change. The solution resulted in the launch of an alternate route to a teaching program, which meant the teachers would meet a different set of requirements than traditionally trained teachers at Marcus's school. Thus, Marcus would train and credential his own teachers. Although the teachers would still have to meet the state's stringent guidelines, Marcus could tailor their abbreviated coursework to prepare them for the required exams. Cost would soon be a factor, though the dean had a plan. The dean agreed to waive the cost of tuition for Marcus's cohort of teachers. He only required that they pay the registration fee associated with the cost of attendance. Although Marcus found initial funding for his program, questions remained about its long-term viability.

In addition to Marcus identifying a graduate program to support prospective teachers with the alternative route to certification, he knew assessments would remain a barrier to both entry to and success in the program. He immediately identified a community partner who had a similar interest in the success of teachers in Amtrak Way and agreed to sponsor both the cost

of test preparation and the cost for prospective educators to take the exam, especially because many of the candidates had taken and failed the licensure exams numerous times.

Teaching Notes

This case study presents a unique opportunity for educational leadership and policy students to grapple with educator shortages from both a policy and practice lens. Moreover, not only does the case study force students to think about the principal's proposed innovation, but it also lends itself to students' exploration of other innovations to support addressing educator shortages. Students must grapple with the context of innovative school staffing models, including a history of poverty and racism. As part of analyzing the case study, the students should consider how the principal stayed committed to the community and work. Much can be learned about the principal's reliance on community members getting results. Further, policy students should consider what policies should be addressed to pave the way for school leaders to develop innovative solutions that are both equitable and effective (McDole & Francies, 2023). School leaders who replicate Marcus's work could create focused efforts that offer novel solutions to systemic challenges, especially in rural school districts. Beyond the innovation, prospective and current school leaders need to consider Marcus's plan for entering the school, precisely his work of meeting with educators and building paths toward licensure.

State Policymaking to Address Teacher Shortages

State education agency leaders serve as policymakers for schools and shoulder a great deal of responsibility for addressing teacher shortages (Francies & McDole, 2022). State education agency leaders, like those in the rural South and Mississippi, have taken such responsibility by developing multifaceted solutions to address educator shortages (Garcia & Muniz, 2020). For example, Mississippi has held the distinction of launching the nation's first state-run teacher residency program in partnership with school districts, colleges of education, and the state to attract, recruit, prepare, and retain teachers. However, far too many states still need to create policy conditions to address widespread educator shortages. Teacher recruitment and retention has largely been the work of school leaders; however, when school systems leaders need the policy conditions and infrastructure necessary to recruit and retain a diverse teacher workforce, challenges persist through multiple generations. These challenges were largely due to a lack of nontraditional models for attracting, preparing, and retaining teachers. If states are to address educator shortages, they will need to not only model Mississippi's efforts but also go beyond these efforts to interrogate the conditions for the current teacher workforce sufficiently.

In fields adjacent to education (e.g., the medical field), policymakers have explored programs and incentives codified in the policy to aid in the growth and maturation of talent to

service the medical profession. For example, Rural Medical Scholars, which funds education and trains medical students to serve in rural communities, has long been in the toolbox of many rural state hospitals struggling to staff emergency rooms. Although similar programs have been developed in the education space, policy needs to keep up in the education space; the demand for classroom teachers has increased daily. Policymakers must act quickly to provide the infrastructure necessary to support schools to ensure every student, regardless of their background, has access to a nurturing, effective teacher who is ready on Day 1.

Addressing teacher shortages has been a crucial challenge for state education agencies, with several key areas where policymakers could focus their efforts to create effective solutions. The following list outlines possible state policymaking approaches to address teacher shortages:

- **Competitive salaries and benefits:** One of the most significant factors affecting teacher retention is their level of compensation and benefits. States can allocate more funding to increase teacher salaries and offer competitive benefit packages to attract and retain talented educators.
- **Loan forgiveness and incentive programs:** States can implement loan forgiveness programs or offer financial incentives to encourage individuals to pursue teaching careers, especially in high-need subjects or underserved areas. These programs can help reduce the financial burden for aspiring teachers and make the profession more appealing.
- **Teacher residency programs:** Creating teacher residency programs can be an effective way to provide aspiring teachers with a combination of classroom experience and mentorship. These programs can help prepare new teachers for the challenges they may face in real classrooms, increasing their confidence and retention rates.
- **Alternative certification pathways:** Policymakers can establish alternative certification pathways to attract professionals from other fields who are interested in becoming teachers. This approach can bring diverse perspectives and expertise to the teaching workforce.
- **Professional development and support:** Providing ongoing professional development and teacher support can enhance job satisfaction and retention. States can invest in high-quality training programs and mentoring initiatives to help teachers grow and improve their effectiveness.
- **Addressing teacher burnout:** Policymakers should address the issue of teacher burnout, which is a significant factor contributing to teacher shortages. Reducing administrative burdens and creating supportive work environments can help combat burnout and encourage teachers to stay in the profession.
- **Diversity and inclusion:** Promoting diversity in the teaching workforce is essential

for creating inclusive learning environments. States can develop policies that encourage recruiting and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds to represent the student population better.

- **Streamlining certification processes:** Simplifying and streamlining teacher certification processes can attract more individuals to the profession. Removing unnecessary barriers and bureaucracy can make it easier for aspiring teachers to enter the workforce.
- **Targeted recruitment efforts:** Policymakers can collaborate with schools and local communities to implement targeted recruitment efforts, focusing on areas with the most significant shortages or specific subjects in high demand.
- **Support for rural and underserved areas:** Additional support and incentives for teachers willing to work in rural or underserved areas can help address teacher shortages in these regions.

Policymakers need to engage with educators, administrators, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive and effective solutions tailored to the needs of their state's education system. By investing in teacher recruitment and retention efforts, states can build a strong and diverse teacher workforce that positively impacts student learning and achievement.

Innovative approaches in educational policy and teacher recruitment, along with retention state education agency leaders, have a tremendous opportunity to impact teacher recruitment and retention (Moss, 2022). Although state education agency leaders are responsible for creating the policy conditions necessary to jolt the systems, school leaders can begin pursuing innovative approaches. These efforts include:

- *Opportunity culture:* Opportunity culture is an innovative approach to teacher recruitment and retention that aims to extend the reach of excellent teachers and provide leadership opportunities within schools. This model creates career advancement options for teachers by redesigning roles and responsibilities. Excellent teachers are identified and allowed to take on leadership positions, such as multi-classroom leaders or subject matter experts while continuing to teach students directly. They receive additional compensation for their leadership roles, which helps with retention. This approach not only helps retain talented teachers but also improves the overall effectiveness of teaching in schools.
- *Mississippi teacher residency:* The Mississippi Teacher Residency Program is a teacher preparation initiative designed to provide aspiring teachers with a comprehensive and immersive training experience. It operates on the concept of residencies like those in the medical field, where aspiring teachers work alongside experienced mentors in classrooms. This hands-on approach allows them to gain practical experience and receive guidance from experienced educators. The residency program better prepares teachers for the challenges they may encounter

in the classroom and improves their retention rates.

- *Teacher apprentice programs*: Teacher apprentice programs are designed to attract individuals to the teaching profession by offering them the opportunity to work as paid apprentices while completing their teacher preparation. These programs allow prospective teachers to gain practical experience and gradually assume more teaching responsibilities under the mentorship of experienced educators. By providing financial support during the training phase, these programs make it more feasible for individuals to pursue a teaching career and increase the likelihood of retention.

- *Pathways to teaching programs*: Pathways to teaching programs are alternative certification pathways that enable professionals from other fields to transition into teaching. These programs recognize individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise can bring valuable perspectives to the classroom. They provide streamlined routes to teacher certification, often combining intensive training with on-the-job experience. Pathways to teaching programs help fill teacher shortages by attracting individuals who might have yet to consider traditional teacher preparation.

These innovative approaches demonstrate states and school leaders are exploring fresh solutions to address teacher shortages and improve teacher retention. By offering various pathways into the profession, providing support and leadership opportunities, and creating comprehensive training experiences, these initiatives can help build a strong and diverse teacher workforce that positively impacts student learning outcomes. Policymakers should continue collaborating with educators and communities to refine and expand these programs for even greater success in the future.

Conclusion

This case study, though set in the rural South, presents a significant opportunity for school and system leaders to rethink their approaches to staffing. While Marcus is not a relic of the past, his efforts provide valuable lessons for leaders seeking innovative staffing solutions. More than a decade after the implementation of No Child Left Behind (2001), efforts to develop innovative staffing approaches continue, but they remain insufficient in supporting communities that are less appealing to prospective teachers and where students have limited access to credentialed educators. In light of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which granted states greater authority over teacher credentialing, Marcus' approach to building partnerships within existing systems offers leaders valuable insights into how they might pursue staffing innovation. The purpose of this case study is to initiate a conversation, not to be the final word. As the title suggests, leaders must remain steadfast in their quest to staff their schools

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APPENDIX

Prompts for Discussion (Questions adapted from Sr. Vincentia Joseph & Sr. Ann Patrick Conrad, NASW Office of Ethics and Professional Review)

1. What is the dilemma in this case? For whom is it a dilemma?
2. Why is this a dilemma?
 - a. What values or principles are at stake? Do people disagree about which values matter, which should take precedence, or how they apply in this case?
 - b. What practical and/or policy considerations are at stake? Do people disagree about which considerations are relevant, which should take precedence, or how they should be addressed in this case?
3. What do you think should be done in this case, by whom? Why?
4. What have you learned from discussing this case that might apply to other ethical dilemmas in education?
 - a. What principles or values are you thinking about for the first time or in a new way?
 - b. What policies or practices are you thinking about for the first time or in a new way?
5. What value is there, if any, to talk through a case like this with others?
 - a. What did you learn about yourself?
 - b. What did you learn about others?
 - c. What did you learn about your institution, organization, or broader context?
 - d. What did you learn about the process itself?
6. Is there anything else you want to bring up or discuss?

Activity 1: Finding Innovative Solutions to Address Leadership (Class Forum)

With this activity, students will be divided into groups of four. Each group will examine the case study carefully and engage in critical discussion to unpack the complexities of Marcus's dilemma as well as the many strategies he used to develop a new path for teacher certification, recruitment, and retention.

Each group will assume the role of a school administrative body, tasked with turning around an underperforming school in the same district, also at risk of losing teachers due to current staffing requirements and structures. While the team is working together to brainstorm innovative ways to tackle staffing challenges, members will identify one teammate to serve as the principal, the representative who will share the innovative solution constructed by the

administrative body to the rest of the class. This solution must be different than the strategy Marcus used but render the same equity-focused outcome. Each principal will share:

- the innovative solution agreed upon by the administrative body and the logic behind its nontraditional approach,
- the feasibility of the idea, and
- the strategy and partners required to get it up and running.

As each principal shares their idea, students will ask questions and engage in stakeholder dialogue.