



# Ozarks Teacher Corps:

Placement, Retention, & Perceptions, 2010-2019



**RURAL SCHOOLS  
COLLABORATIVE**

A report by the Rural  
Schools Collaborative

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# INTRODUCTION:

The Ozarks Teacher Corps was launched in 2010-11 as part of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks' (CFO) Rural Schools Partnership (RSP), an initiative driven by the belief that "public education is a linchpin issue in rural economic development."

The Rural Schools Partnership has three primary components:

1. Establishing, developing, and building rural school foundations and school-related charitable funds;
2. Promoting place-based teaching practices and programs through the Louis L. and Julia Dorothy Coover Charitable Foundation Place-based Education Grantmaking Program of Commerce Trust (Coover Program);
3. Developing rural teachers through the Ozarks Teacher Corps, which is funded by the Chesley and Flora Lea Wallis Trust, an endowment fund of approximately \$1.8 million.

In less than a decade the impact of the RSP has exceeded the expectations of the CFO board members and staff who planned, resourced, and launched the effort:

- Since its inception the RSP has built partnerships with 77 rural school districts and now includes more than 550 rural education-related funds with assets in excess of \$30 million.
- In less than a decade the Coover Program has awarded more than \$750,000 in support of innovative and place-centered academic programs.
- The Ozarks Teacher Corps has awarded more than \$800,000 in scholarship awards and placed more than 60 teachers in rural Ozarks schools.

This report is focused on the placement rate, retention rate, and perceptions of Ozarks Teacher Corps members in southern Missouri schools.



# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

## Program Synopsis:

The Ozarks Teacher Corps is a two-year scholarship program available to outstanding teacher education candidates who are willing to make a commitment to teach in a rural Ozarks school for at least three years after graduation. Program candidates are eligible to apply to the program during their sophomore year in college. In addition to the rural teaching commitment, Ozarks Teacher Corps participants attend seminars on issues related to rural education and are assigned readings. The seminars have focused strongly on the value of place-based education, and Teton Science Schools of Jackson, Wyoming is currently providing professional development for the program. Teton Science Schools is a Rural Schools Collaborative partner and anchors RSC's Northern Rockies Hub.

The majority of Ozarks Teacher Corps members have been from Missouri State University, Missouri State University—West Plains, and Drury University. A handful of participants have come from Evangel University and Ozarks Technical College.

The scholarship is paid directly to the higher education institution. There has been only one instance where CFO has requested repayment from a higher education institution for a student's failure to honor the rural teaching commitment. The institution complied with the request. Still, it should be noted that several other participants have not successfully completed the program (see p. 6).

CFO leadership and staff have coordinated the program from the beginning. However, a recent partnership between CFO and Missouri State University—West Plains will give the latter, which is located in an extremely rural and historically impoverished region, a greater role in program administration. A more defined partnership is also being explored with Drury University.

## Purpose of Study:

The Ozarks Teacher Corps has become a national model for the recruitment, preparation, and placement of rural teachers. This intentional and collaborative initiative is a key partner of the multi-state Rural Schools Collaborative, and it has helped spawn rural teacher corps programs and related discussions throughout the Rural Schools Collaborative's ten regional Hubs (see p. 4 graphic).

The survey provides information that should help address the following questions:

1. How do we improve existing programs? How do we inform the development and launch of future programs?
2. How do we "make the case" to potential funders who have an interest in the future of rural schools and communities?

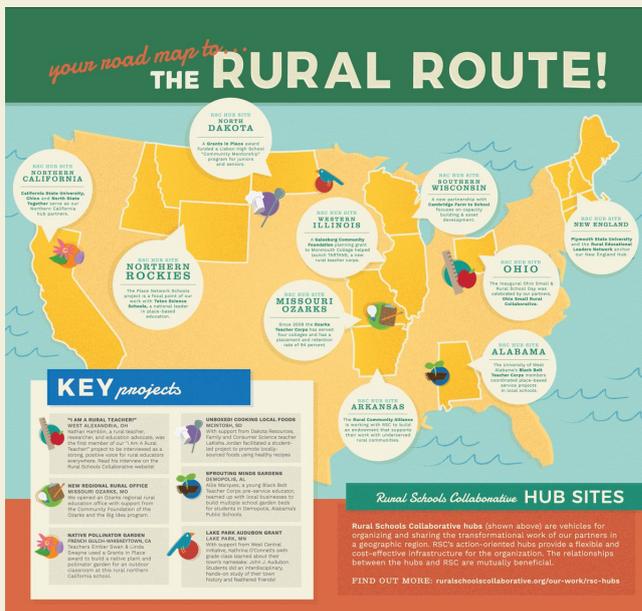
# PROJECT DESCRIPTION, CONT.

## Report Methodology

- The Rural Schools Collaborative was engaged by the RSP and CFO to survey Corps members and produce this report.
- Annual records from the Ozarks Teacher Corps were used to locate participants and verify or update their current status.
- An online survey was sent to the RSP alums who have successfully completed the Ozarks Teacher Corps program. "Success" is defined by a Corps member:
  - o Graduating with a teaching certificate, and
  - o Honoring the three-year commitment to teach in a rural school, or
  - o Making progress as a first, second, or third year rural teacher.

## Report Limitations

- The findings of this report are straightforward, and there was no effort to compare the Ozarks Teacher Corps "alum group" with a control group of recent Ozarks rural teacher "hires" who were not participants in the program.
- Research on rural teacher recruitment and retention is sparse, but this report has findings that may serve as good comparisons to what research does exist. Those are noted in various sections of the report. They are understated.
- Although the survey response rate was excellent (80 %), there is no guarantee that respondents were completely objective. Knowing that this information would be shared throughout the Ozarks could have influenced responses, even though respondents knew their answers were anonymous. In other words, folks in the Ozarks tend to be nice!



*The Ozarks Teacher Corps model has been shared throughout the Rural Schools Collaborative's national network.*

# OVERVIEW

The Ozarks Teacher Corps is perceived as a successful program by the leadership and associates of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Rural Schools Partnership, and Rural Schools Collaborative. This report's findings seem to justify the confidence in the program. Consider the following information:

- The program's placement and retention rates are very encouraging—topping 90%.
- Three-fourths of respondents are still teaching in the school district that hired them out of college.
- More than 20% of the respondents are teaching science and math.
- Three-fourths of the respondents believed they developed a better grasp of “rural issues” through their participation in the Corps.
- Two-thirds of the teachers said they practiced “place-based” education.
- More than 85% want to remain in a rural location.
- And, perhaps most noteworthy, 100% of the respondents (Yes, 100%!) declared they would recommend rural teaching as a career.

Still, there are some areas of potential concern or, at the very least, issues that deserve further study:

- Only three Corps alums are serving in administrative roles, and less than one-fourth of the respondents indicated an interest in becoming a school administrator. This seems unusual, even though a good number of the respondents are still early in their career.
- Nearly 60% have yet to receive any external funding support for their instructional activities, which has been a strong focus of the Ozarks Teacher Corps program.
- Somewhat surprisingly, more than 40% have not taken any graduate level courses. This would seem to be of interest and concern to the region's higher education institutions.

The above issues are addressed in the sections that follow. The final segment of this report includes commentary and suggestions from the respondents.

# PLACEMENT AND RETENTION

The Ozarks Teacher Corps has **accepted 89 students** into the program since its 2010-11 launch. This includes 18 current program members, who are scheduled to graduate from their respective institutions in 2019 or 2020.

Of the **71 participants who should have graduated, gained certification, and transitioned** to serving as rural teachers in the Missouri Ozarks, **65 successfully completed the program** and are currently teaching in a rural school or, at the very least, honored their three-year commitment. This represents a **92% placement rate**.

Since graduates of the Classes of 2016, 2017, and 2018 are still working toward honoring their three-year commitments, the authors examined the Ozarks Teacher Corps Classes from 2011 through 2015, which included 44 students who were accepted into the program. Of these **40 successfully graduated and honored their three-year commitments**. Therefore, **91% of the students** who entered the Ozarks Teacher Corps between 2010-11 and 2014-15 went on to serve as rural teachers for at least three years, and, as is shown later in this report, most of these Ozarks Teacher Corps alums are still teaching in the district that hired them.

How do these numbers compare with national research on the placement and retention rates on new rural teachers? A 2015 report on new teacher retention from the Center for American Progress, which was based on national surveys from the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, found that "fully 70 percent of beginning teachers stay in the profession for at least five years." The report also indicated "87 percent of new teachers stayed in the profession for at least three years." (Source: "Despite Reports to the Contrary, New Teachers Are Staying in Their Jobs Longer," Center for American Progress, 2015) Even with its admittedly small sample size, the Ozarks Teacher Corps seems to meet or exceed the expectations that are derived from the broader and more diverse national landscape.



# PLACEMENT AND RETENTION, CONT.

But what about retention rates specific to rural schools, specifically small schools located in rural regions with high rates of generational poverty? Unfortunately, determining across-the-board rural retention numbers for varied rural regions is virtually impossible, and any study claiming to do so deserves a critical eye. However, a 2016 summary of “Teacher Recruitment and Retention” by John David Ulferts does shed light on some national trends:

- Rural schools are susceptible to high attrition rates.
- Rural schools of less than 300 have the highest rates of teacher turnover.
- Teacher recruitment and retention woes add to the economic distress of rural schools.
- Rural districts have a particularly difficult time attracting and retaining secondary science and math teachers.

(Source: *A Brief Summary of Teacher Recruitment and Retention in the Smallest Illinois Rural Schools*, Rural Educator, Fall 2015/Spring 2016, pp. 14-24.)

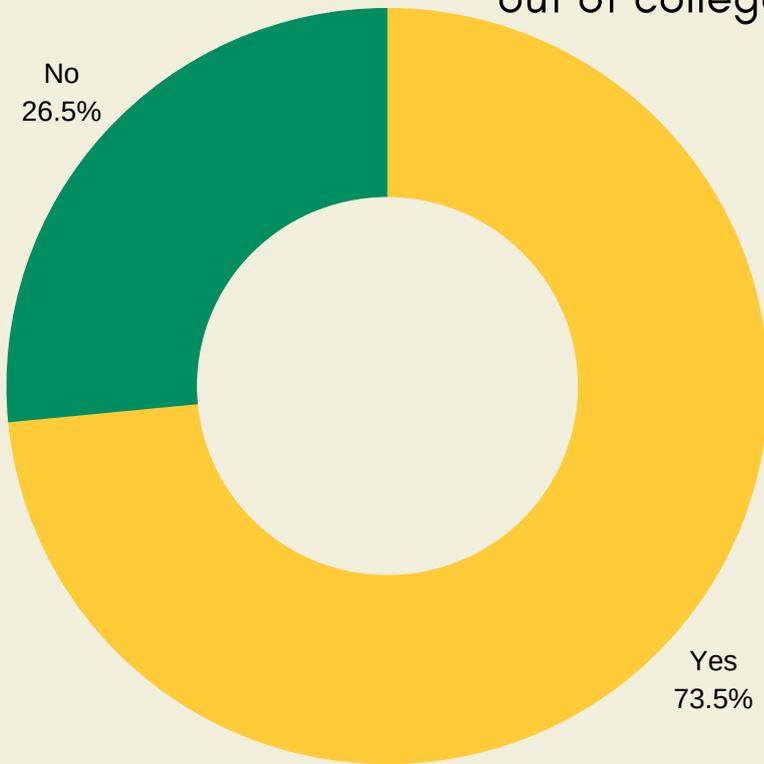
A 2018 report, *Out of the Loop*, from the Center for Public Education and the National School Boards Association echoes Ulferts’ summarizations. According to this report, rural school districts are challenged by “hard-to-fill-positions” in the following ways:

- Rural districts have an increased likelihood of employing a critically high percentage of new teachers—defined by turnover rates of at least 17%.
- High turnover rates force rural districts to spend more time and money on hiring and training new teachers.
- There is data that suggests the high turnover in rural districts may be driven more by teachers leaving the profession than transferring from one district to another.
- Rural districts generally report greater difficulty in filling STEM positions and teachers to meet growing ELL (English Language Learners) student populations.

Although there are no authentic apple-to-apple comparisons available, the Ozarks Teacher Corps and its robust teacher retention rates suggest that it is certainly a model for consideration and further study, especially in an environment where so many rural schools struggle with hiring and retaining new teachers.

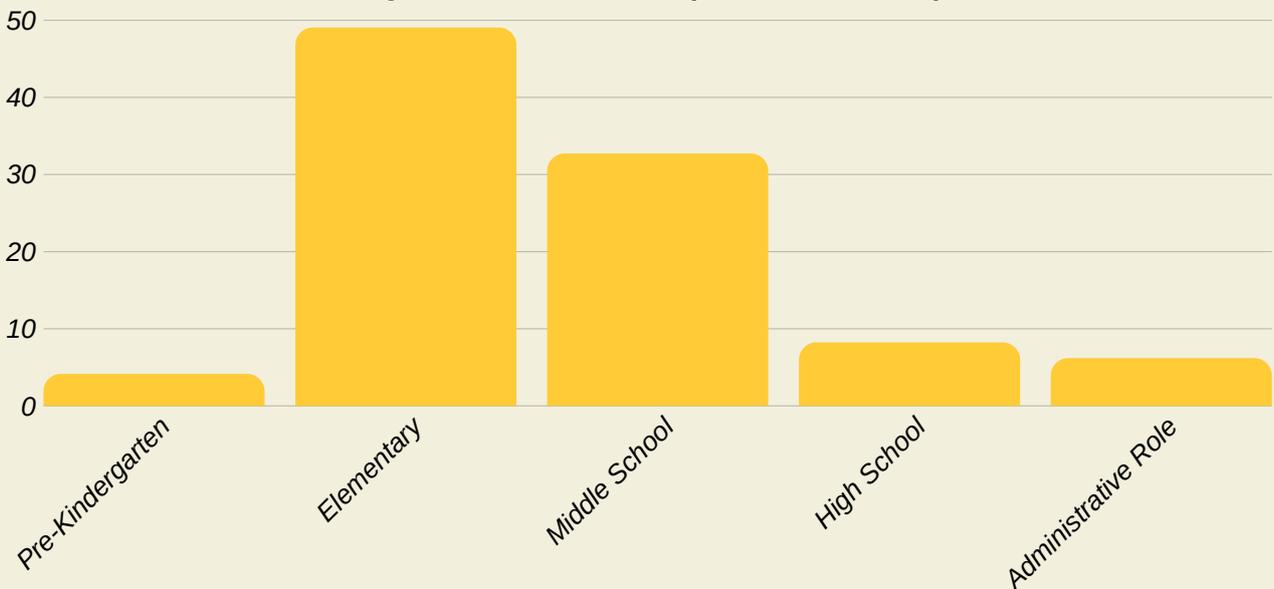
# SURVEY RESULTS

Q. 1: Are you still teaching in the school district that hired you out of college?



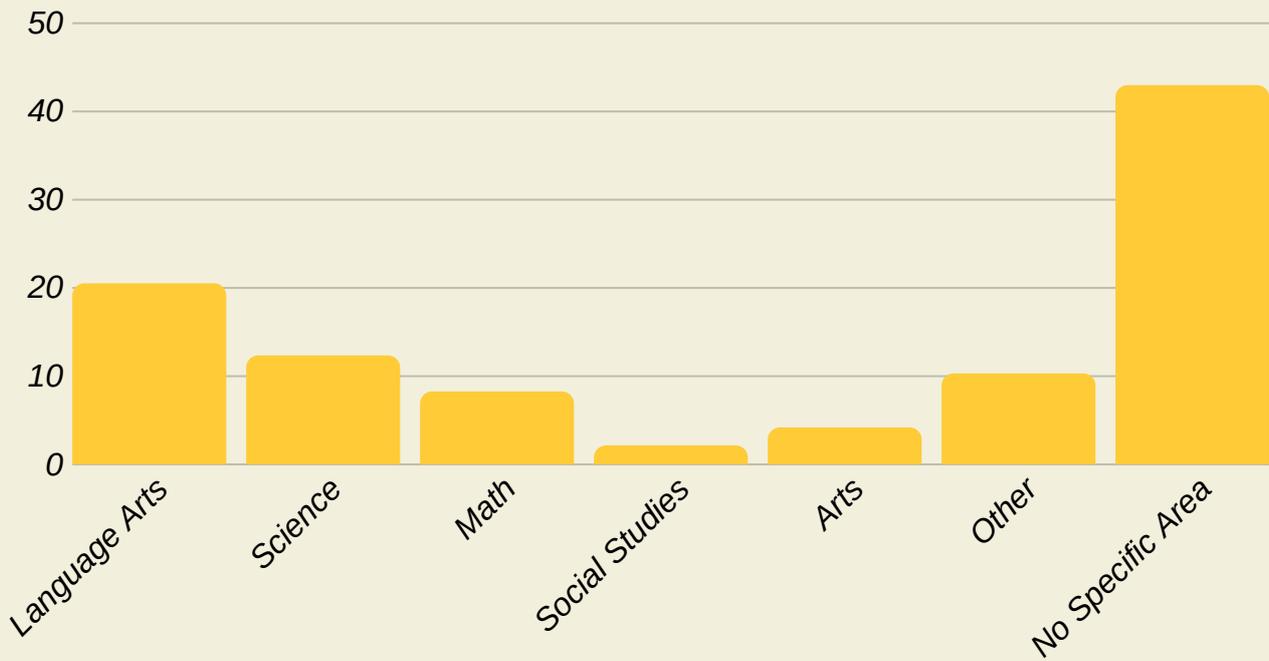
Based on what we know about retention and attrition in rural schools, this appears to be a strong and positive finding. In the Ozarks there is a perception that many first-year teachers will take a position in a small school upon graduation and then move to a larger or better paying district at the earliest opportunity. These numbers appear to run counter to that assumption.

Q. 2: What grade level do you currently teach?



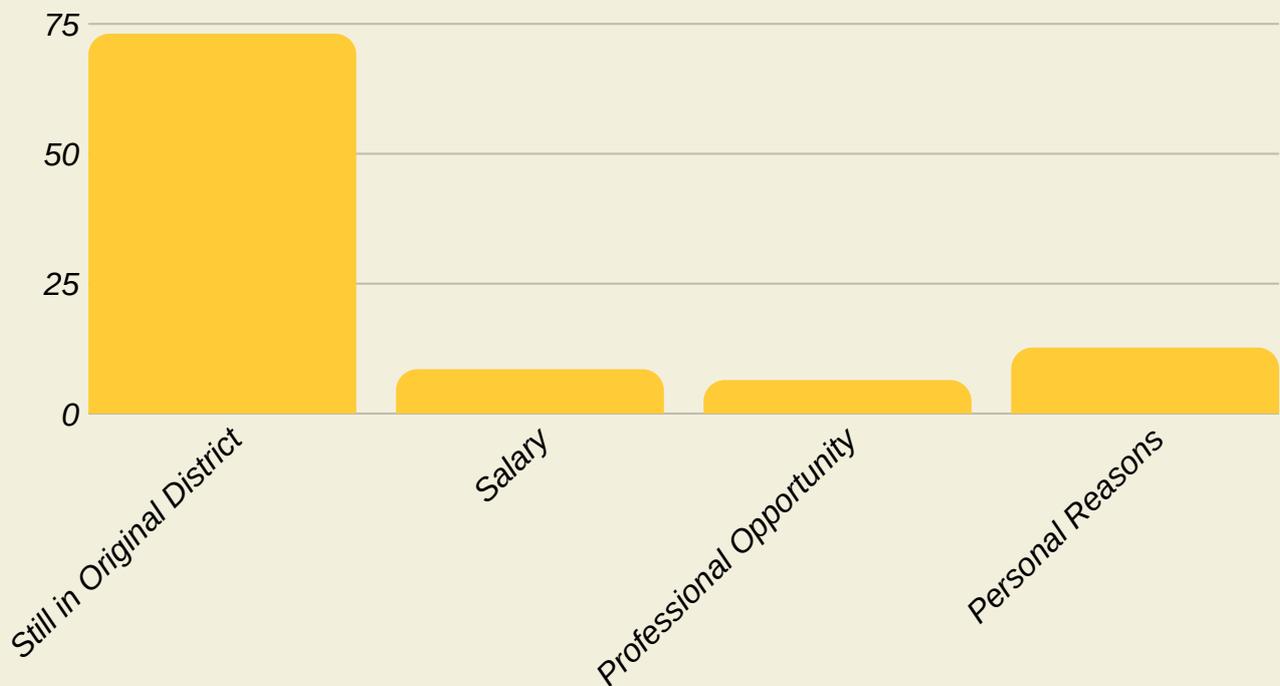
A little more than half of the respondents are teaching in pre-K or elementary school settings. These numbers mirror national trends. A report from Bellwether Education Partners (*Nuance in the Noise: The Complex Reality of Teacher Shortages*, January 2019) showed that 55% of traditional teacher preparation program completers were in the fields of elementary education and early childhood education. This corresponds with the Ozarks Teacher Corps pool, which suggests it is an appropriate group to study.

### Q. 3: Do you teach a specific content area?



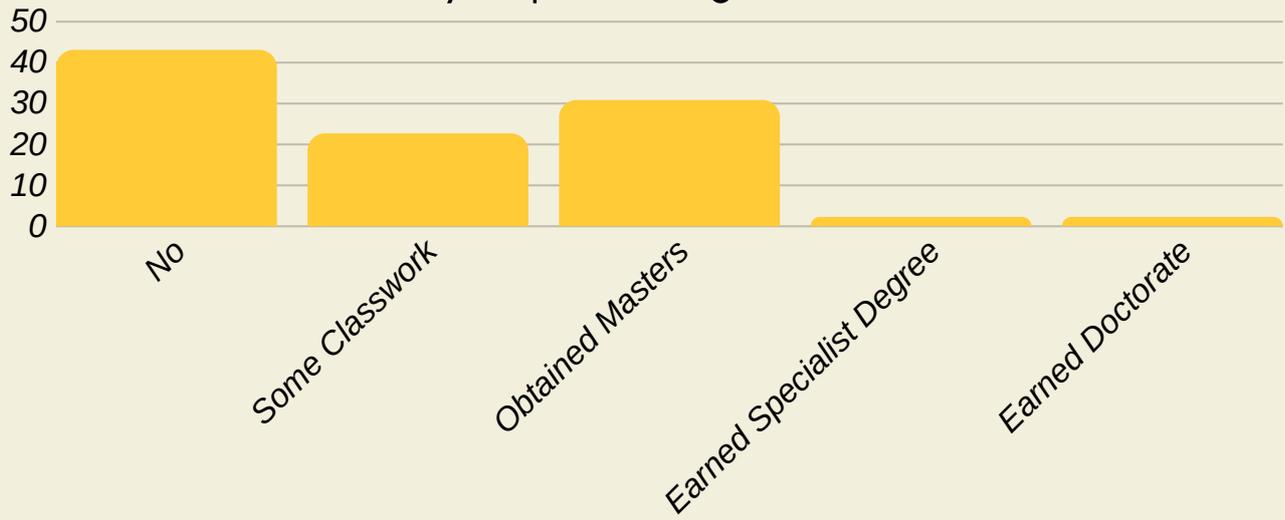
Reality is sometimes better than perceptions. Community Foundation of the Ozarks leadership has often “fretted” over the lack of science and mathematics majors who have applied for the program. However, nearly 20% of Ozarks Teacher Corps alums are science and math teachers, which exceeds the expected nationwide percentage of new teachers going into those fields. (Bellwether Education Partners, 2019).

### Q. 4: If you have taken a position with a different district, what led to the change?



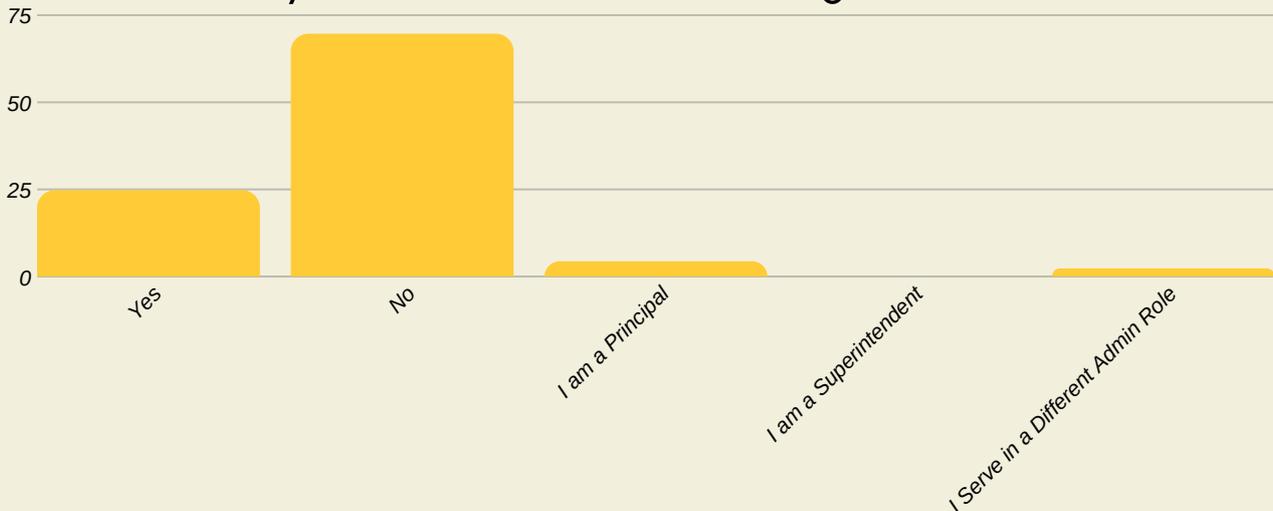
Obviously, the majority of respondents have not left their first school district, and the small group that did move on to another district presents no clear consensus as to why a change was made. The comments section (p. 17), however, provides some interesting anecdotal information related to this issue.

### Q. 5: Have you pursued graduate studies?



This may be one of the more surprising and, perhaps, troubling findings, especially when one considers that, by and large, applicants who are accepted into the program are high achieving students. Again, a pool that leans “early stage career” could affect this result, but the fact that more than 40% of the alums have not pursued any graduate coursework seems unusual. There could be any number of reasons for this, but the region’s higher education institutions might find this of interest.

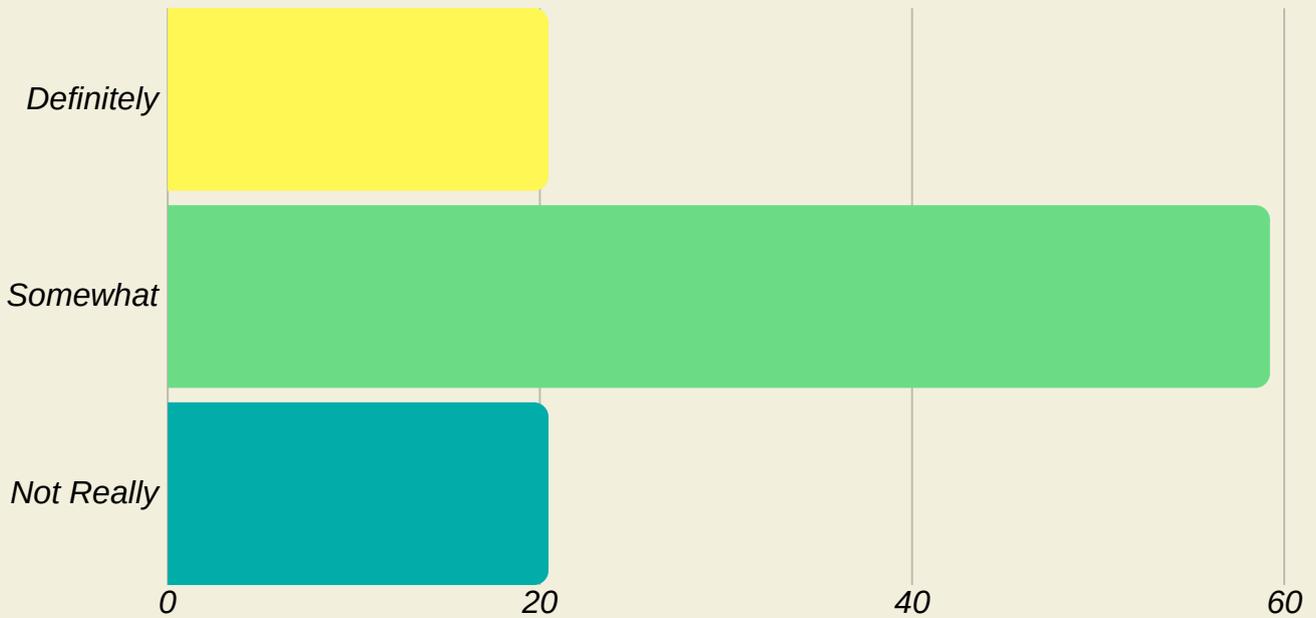
### Q. 6: Are you interested in becoming an administrator?



Almost 70% of the respondents declared they had no interest in becoming a school administrator. While the average “age” and “career stage” of the respondents may have affected this result, the number still seems high and might be indicative of a worrisome national trend. According to a National Association of Secondary Schools Principals position statement (2019) on the *Principal Shortage*: “One out of every two principals is not retained beyond their third year of leading a school. School leaders who are retiring, transferring schools, or pursuing new opportunities within the education sector are not being replaced by enough qualified candidates. As a result, many school districts across the country report principal vacancies and a serious lack of qualified applicants to replace them.”

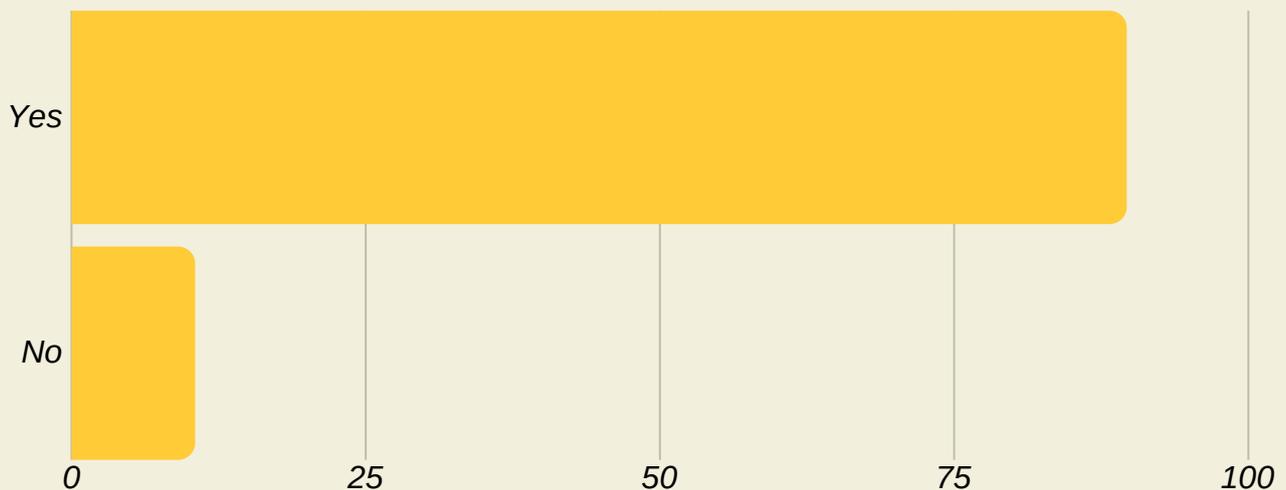
This survey provides limited information on this topic, and Question 6, like Question 5, warrants further study.

### Q. 7: Do you perceive yourself as a community leader?



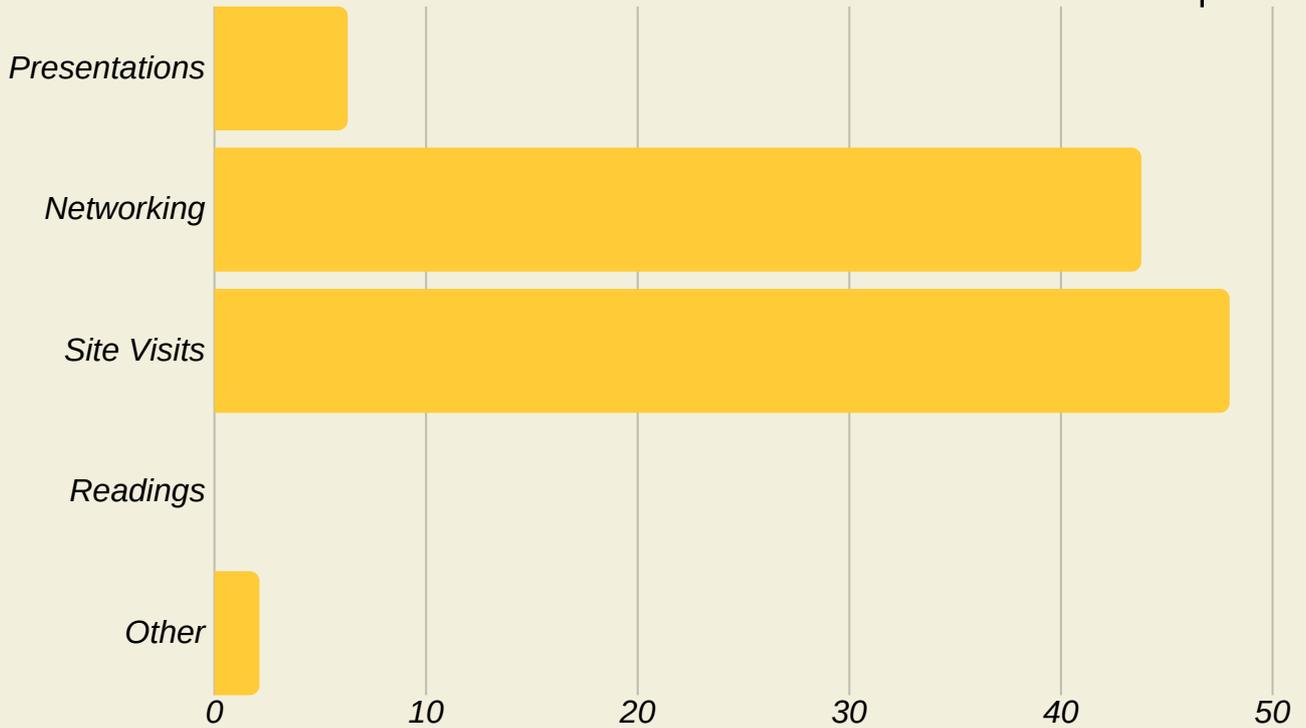
In truth, this is a vague question, and the concept of “teacher leadership” is hard to define. However, it seems fair to state that communities benefit from teachers serving as community leaders . The Rural Schools Collaborative believes that “public schools may be the best available vehicle for attracting “intellectual capital” to small, rural communities.” In turn, the “leadership” abilities of rural teachers should add to the “social capital” of rural or remote regions.

### Q. 8: Did your host community embrace you during your first year of teaching?



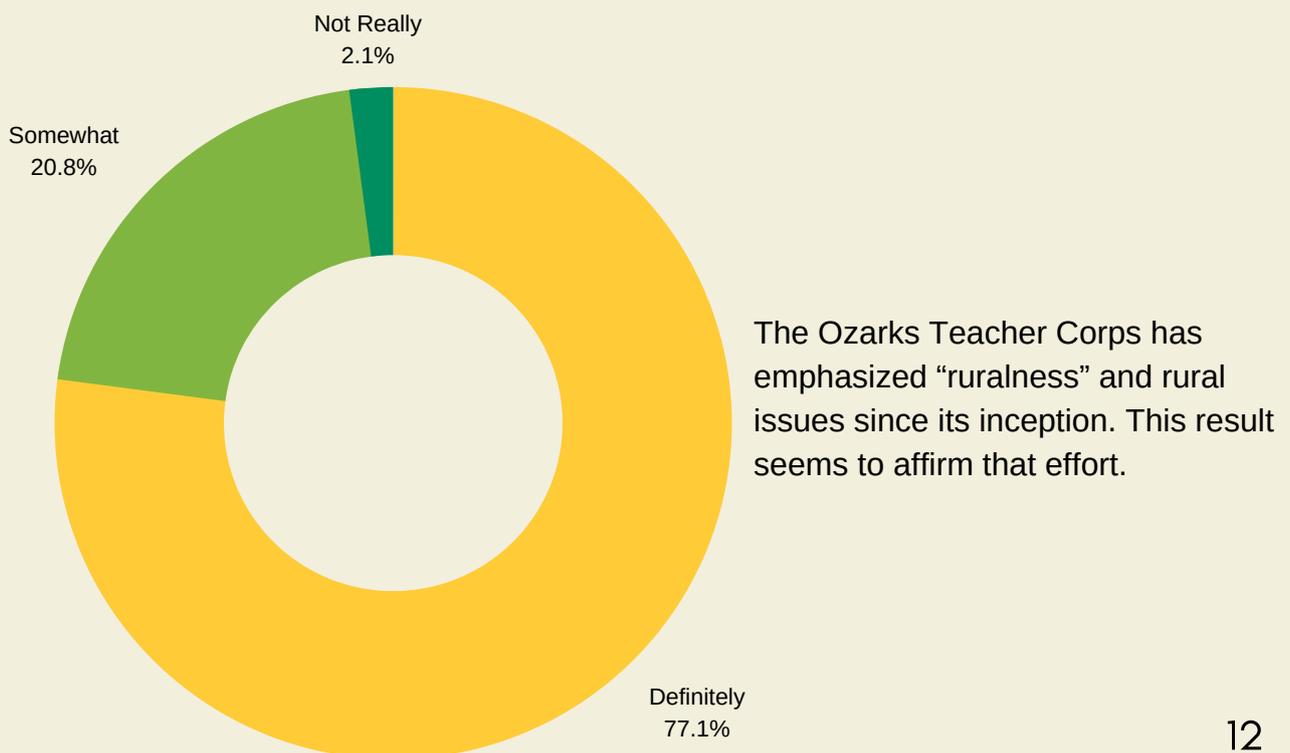
The fact that almost 90% of Ozarks Teacher Corps alums sensed their community embraced them during their first year of teaching is worth noting. The concept of “hosting” is an oft-discussed element in forward thinking rural community development. The overwhelming positive response to this question is both somewhat surprising and encouraging.

### Q. 9: What was the best attribute of Ozarks Teacher Corps?

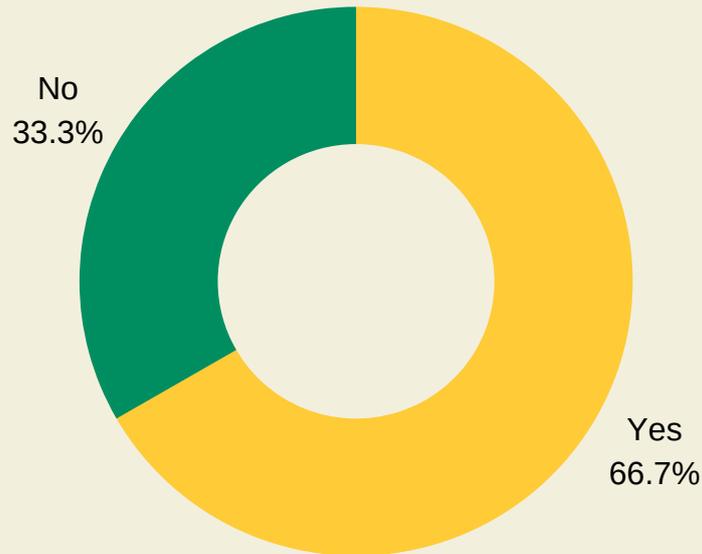


Nine out of ten respondents selected “Networking” or “Site visits” as the best attribute of their Ozarks Teacher Corps experience. This information should be useful to future Ozarks Teacher Corps planners and to those coordinating new teacher corps-like efforts. This finding is augmented by a number of related remarks in the comments section (p. 17).

### Q. 10: Did you develop a better understanding of rural issues through the Ozarks Teacher Corps?



## Q. 11: Do you implement or promote place-based learning in your classroom or school?



Place-based instruction has been a major focus of Ozarks Teacher Corps presentations and site visits. Of course, implementing place-based practices is not solely related to teacher know-how, as place-based approaches require the support of school leadership and the school community. Perceptions about the pressure to produce test scores may work against teachers utilizing place-based strategies, but the fact that two-thirds of the Ozarks Teacher Corps respondents claim to “implement or promote” place-based learning to some degree is encouraging.

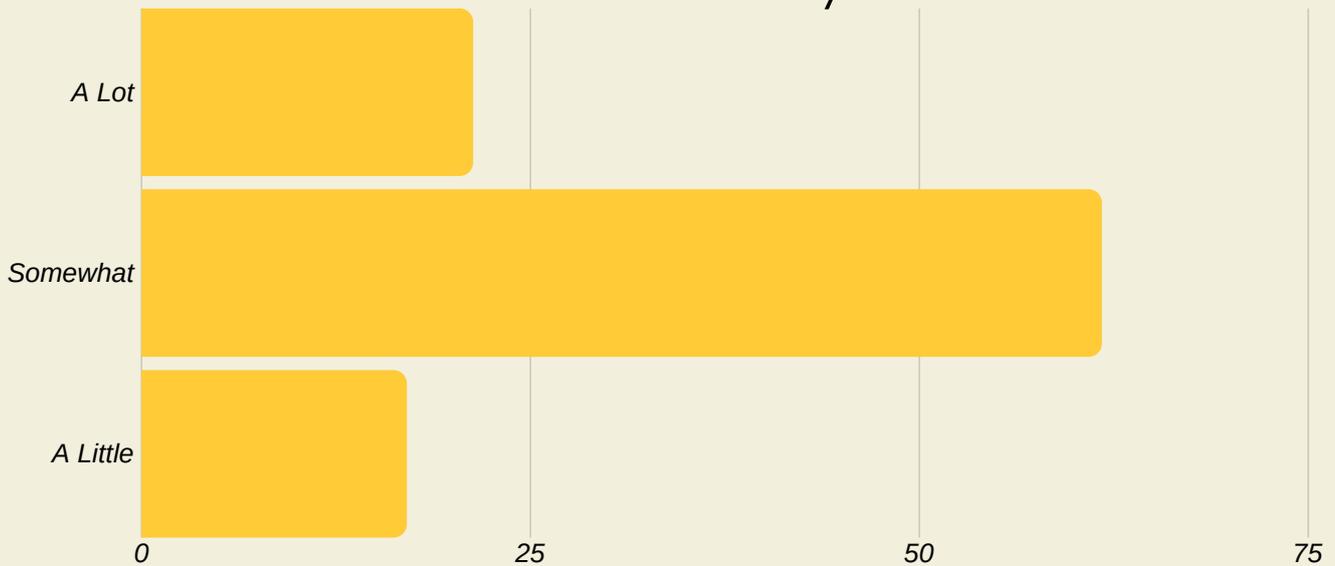
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## Q. 12: Have you received any grants or outside funding to support student learning activities?



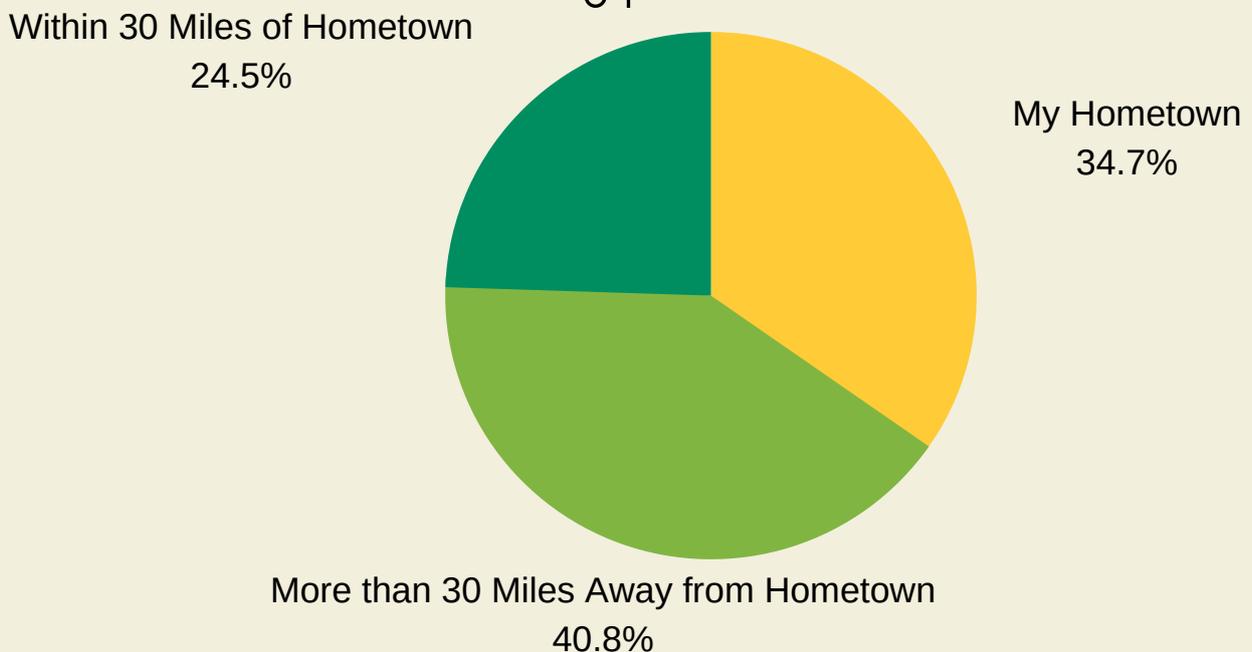
Partnerships, collaboration, and the importance of external funding are recurring themes in the Ozarks Teacher Corps experience, so it is somewhat disappointing that only 40% of respondents indicated they have garnered outside funding support. Of course, different schools may have different rules and expectations on this matter, but building community bridges and seeking external support is of critical importance to rural schools and their teachers.

Q. 13: How connected are your students' educational pursuits to the community?



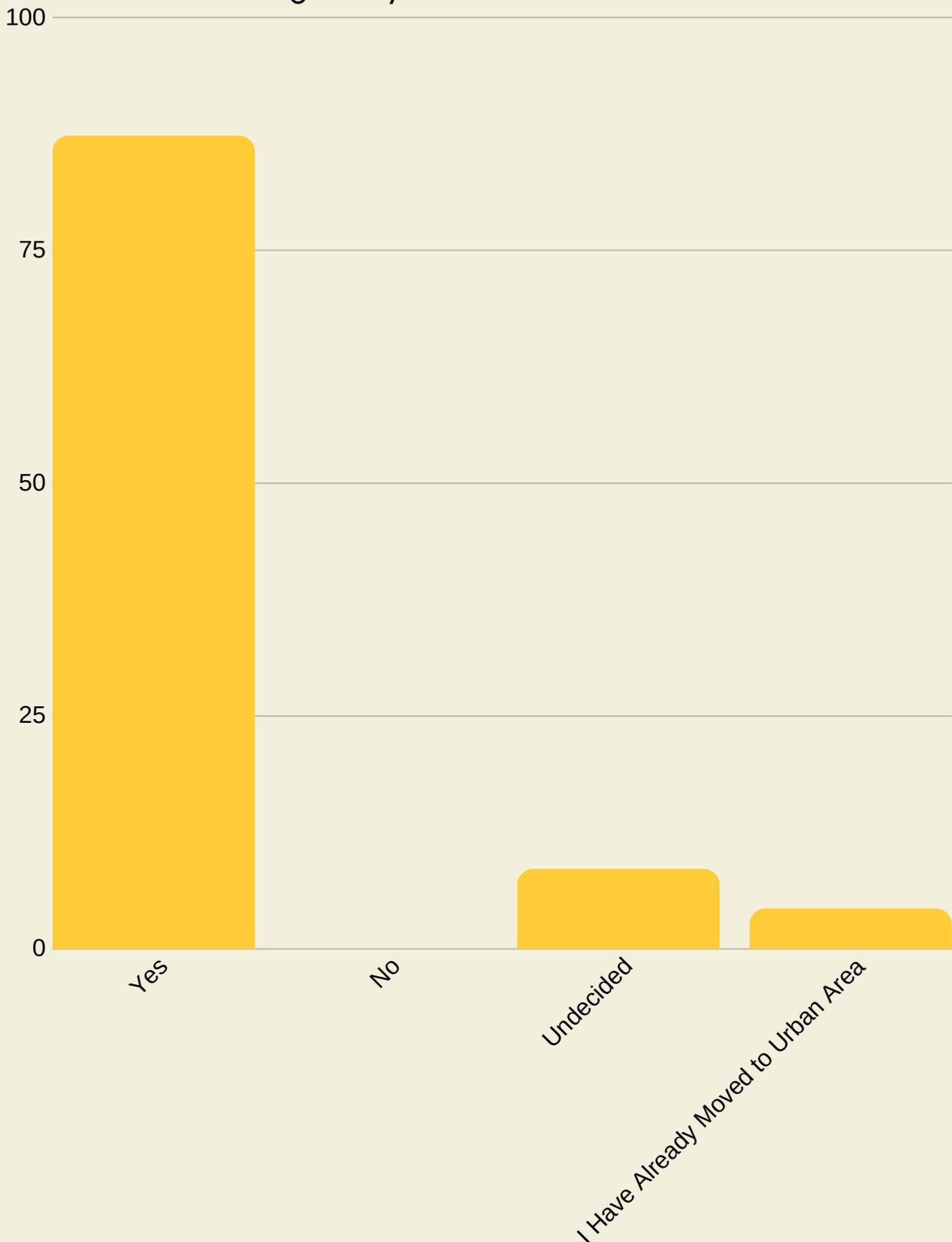
Questions 11, 12, and 13 are closely related, and more than 80% of respondents noted that their students' academic pursuits were at least in some sense connected to the community. This question may appear somewhat nebulous, but the "community connection" is something that has been emphasized strongly to Ozarks Teacher Corps members.

Q. 14: What best describes the location of your current teaching position?



One of the more telling findings in this report is that nearly 60% of the respondents currently teach in their hometown or within 30 miles of where they attended high school. This is not surprising. In fact, any Google search will produce a number of "studies" that have historically supported this finding. This is another instance where the Ozarks Teacher Corps pool seems to align with groups of rural teachers that have been examined extensively in the past.

## Q. 15: Do you see yourself remaining in a rural setting throughout your education career?



Almost 90% of the respondents indicated they planned on remaining in a rural setting throughout their career. This seems to be a very high positive response, which poses additional questions: Does the Ozarks Teacher Corps naturally attract future teachers that have an unusually strong affinity for rural places? Or does the experience in the Ozarks Teacher Corps prepare students to thrive in rural settings? This finding, along with Question 16, is another topic for study.

Q. 16: Would you recommend a career in rural teaching to your students or other young people?



Yes  
100%

However this is framed, shaped, or explained, it is simply a remarkable finding. Furthermore, it runs counter to so much of the national narrative on the waning interest in and negative perceptions of teaching and rural locations.

This report strongly recommends that one of the region's higher education institutions delves more deeply into this subject with Ozarks Teacher Corps alums.

Perhaps, there is something in the water.

# PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

## Suggestions:

- It was very difficult to be the only math teacher in a rural school -- without any support from experienced teachers. When I moved to a district with other math teachers, I grew exponentially. I would argue that new teachers need some experience teaching alongside veterans before moving to the rural setting without any support. There were A LOT of things that I didn't know when I was by myself and hadn't ever taught before. Maybe some sort of apprenticeship connection could be made between a veteran content-area teacher and the new OTC teachers.
- There should be an option for working with more than one age group. Nearly every music or art teacher in a rural district teaches more than one age level. I am actually Pre K- 12.

## Reflections:

- Rural teaching is the best. There is such a sense of community here. Wouldn't trade it for anything.
- Ozarks Teacher Corps led me to many opportunities that otherwise I would not have known were available. I will always be appreciative.
- I enjoyed and am thankful for all of the opportunities the scholarship provided for me. Continuing this scholarship will allow other future teachers to do the same. Thank you!
- It would be wonderful if there were scholarship opportunities for a graduate degree. Given the pay at the smaller rural districts, I can't afford to work on a Master's Degree.
- Love the community I work in and couldn't imagine teaching anywhere else. The feeling of teaching here is like no other, I appreciate it more the longer I am here.
- I appreciate what you all do to fund schools and education. I love working in a rural school system.
- In my very first Teacher Corps meeting, a presentation was done about Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. I was inspired and knew that I would make that happen for my hometown someday. That day has come, and we have been running for almost a year now! That program has been a blessing for our community and has been a great unifier for our children and community members. I'm in my second year of teaching, but I'm not done with community projects just yet! Thank you guys for being such a great support system and inspiration for rural educators.
- Thanks for all you do! You all are amazing and I am forever grateful to OTC!
- I am very proud to have been a part of the Ozarks Teacher Corps.
- The networking with other people just like you, going through classes, and earning the same degree was my favorite part of the program. It helped me see that being a rural teacher has pride and meaning for not only our hometowns and towns similar, but for our students and their futures. The connections I made through the Ozarks Teachers Corps are some that I'll never forget and still contact today for help or references.

# PARTICIPANT COMMENTS, CONT.

- Keep up the good work.
- I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the Ozark Teacher Corps, and although I did not know if I would stay at my original school, I have. I love working at this school and felt that my choice to work in a rural district has been affirmed over and over again.
- This program was very helpful for me in preparing for teaching and I have enjoyed staying with the program even after I graduated. I was sad to hear that it is no longer offered for MSU Springfield as well as West Plains and have heard students from MSU Springfield ask about the program. **(Editor's note: This is not totally accurate)**
- This is my 3rd year teaching. I really enjoy what I am doing. I am also pursuing my Master's Degree. Thank you very much Ozark Teacher Corps and the donors!
- This scholarship was amazing, and I'll always appreciate all I learned from the OTC.
- The Ozark Teacher Corps provides teachers with the opportunity to give back to their students. Having the knowledge and means to do so are what can make the difference to a rural teacher.
- I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Ozarks Teacher Corps.
- I valued my time as an educator in a rural school setting, specifically where I grew up! I only moved to an urban area due to proximity to our home and the reduced travel time for my growing family. My time in this program was extremely valuable!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Community Foundation of the Ozarks provided funding for this report through its Rural Schools Partnership. CFO is clearly the national philanthropic leader in supporting school-centered rural development.

This report was prepared by Thomas D. Funk, a research intern with the Rural Schools Collaborative. Additional assistance was provided by Gary Funk, RSC director; Dr. Julie Leeth, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, and Dr. Jane Ward, Missouri State University-West Plains.

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