

Preservice Teachers' Perspectives of Working in Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT

Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers is a key concern in rural areas. We collected data from preservice teachers regarding three themes related to working in rural schools: Are preservice teachers willing to work in rural areas? What characteristic about a school is most important (e.g., class size, resources, climate)? What are their thoughts about options for housing in rural areas (commute, accessibility, proximity)? For each theme, we will share preservice teachers' perceptions.

The purpose of our research is to supply rural communities with the resources needed to grow their system of continuous improvement. The data presents preservice and beginning teachers' stated desires and needs regarding their professional goals within the context of rural schools and communities. By sharing their perspectives, we will target growing a system of continuous improvement in rural districts by brainstorming potential solutions while keeping in mind the perceptions of all stakeholders. By focusing on motivating and retaining teachers in rural districts, we will be targeting the eventual transformation of those areas through education.

Background

North Carolina public schools are faced with a difficult task. With the decrease of the budget for education and the rise of private schools, rural schools in North Carolina struggle with keeping up with the needs of their students. Students in rural communities are often faced with poverty and food insecurity. Teachers who teach in rural communities are often overcome with a lack of affordable housing and funding for classroom equipment.

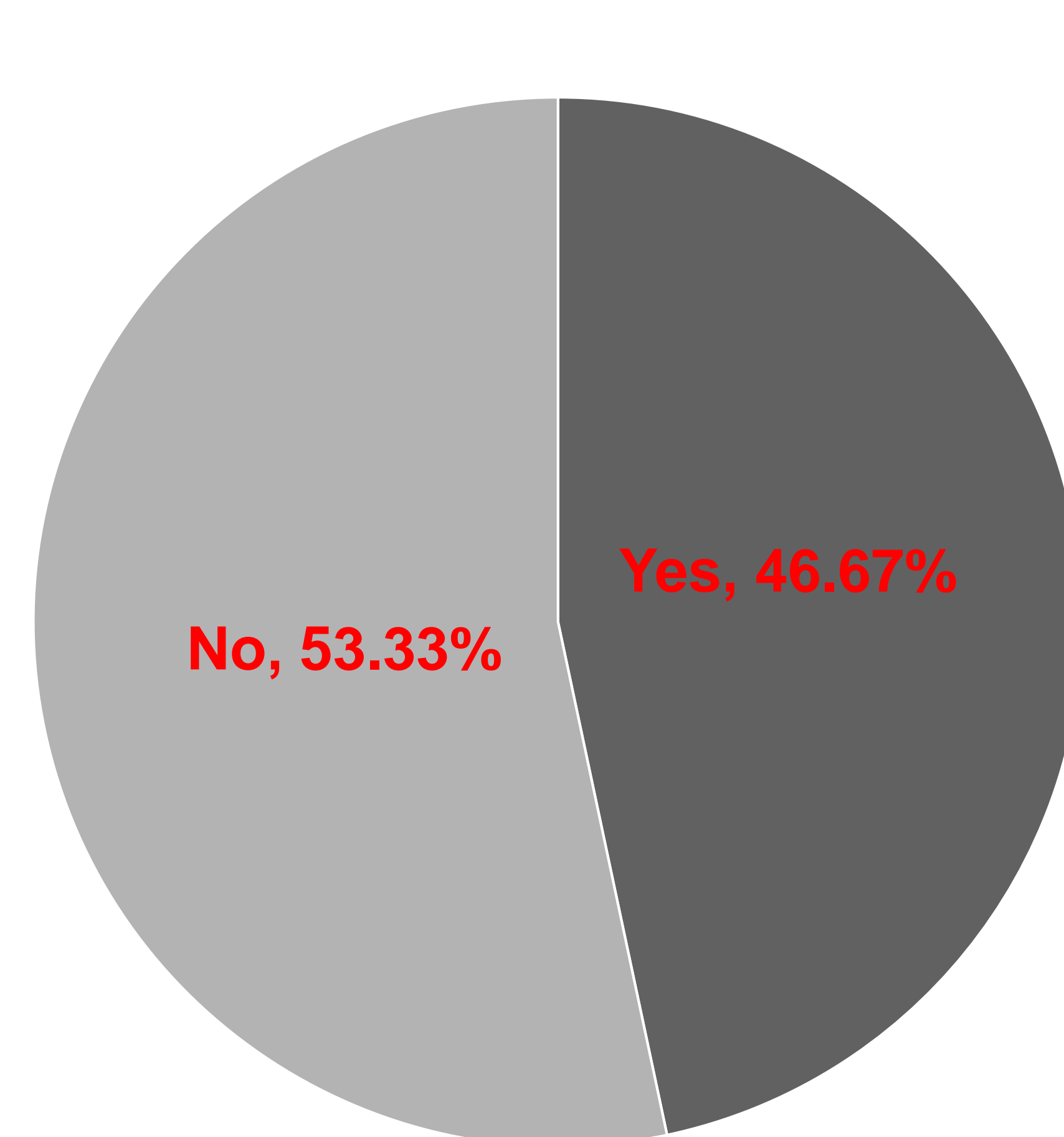
METHODS

This study is institutional review board (IRB) certified. The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics online survey database software. The study was sent through email to all undergraduate education majors at East Carolina University. This includes students that are in an education preparation field, but not within the College of Education such as Music Education majors. The survey had over 272 participants who responded from April 17 through May 16.

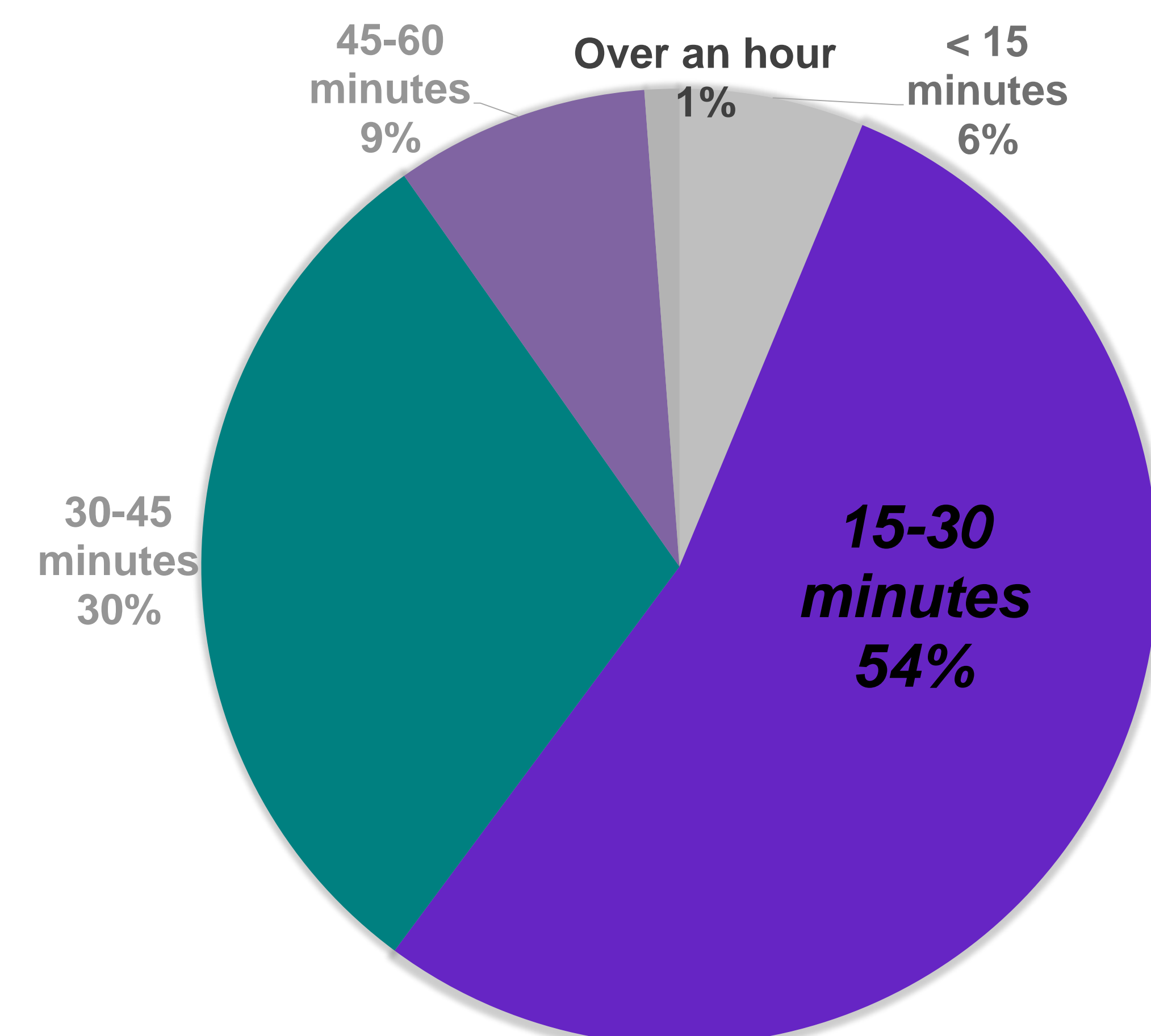
RESULTS

One of the important topics superintendents of rural counties have been exploring is providing housing for new teachers. Among our surveyed population, we asked prospective teachers if they were interested in having a roommate if the school district supplied housing. The surprising outcome was that 53% of surveyed students would not be interested in having a roommate (136 out of 255 students surveyed) (as displayed in figure 7). The school district funded homes would allow teachers to have their own bedroom and bathroom but share common areas like the living room and the kitchen. The outcome was understandable since new teachers would want to live on their own, however, 47% of students surveyed are interested in this idea (119 out of 255 students surveyed). This is a key population group that superintendents in rural schools should try to recruit.

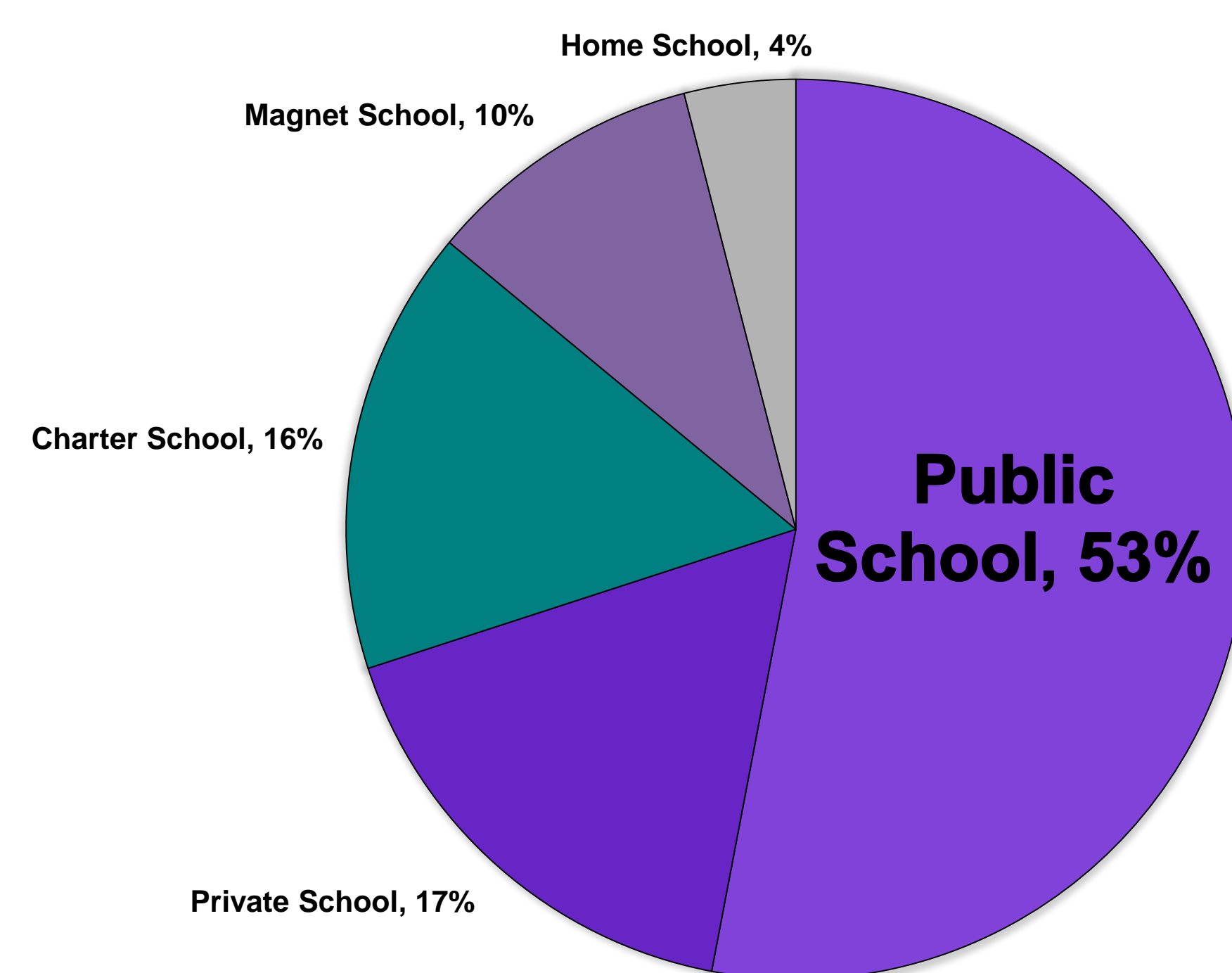
Another issue teachers are facing is driving distances to and from their schools. If we are able to provide housing that is closer to their school, then more people may be willing to live within these counties. The majority of students in our survey said that they would only be willing to drive a maximum of 45 minutes to work (as displayed in figure 6). For some counties, this is a far stretch given that there are no homes or apartments for rent nearby.



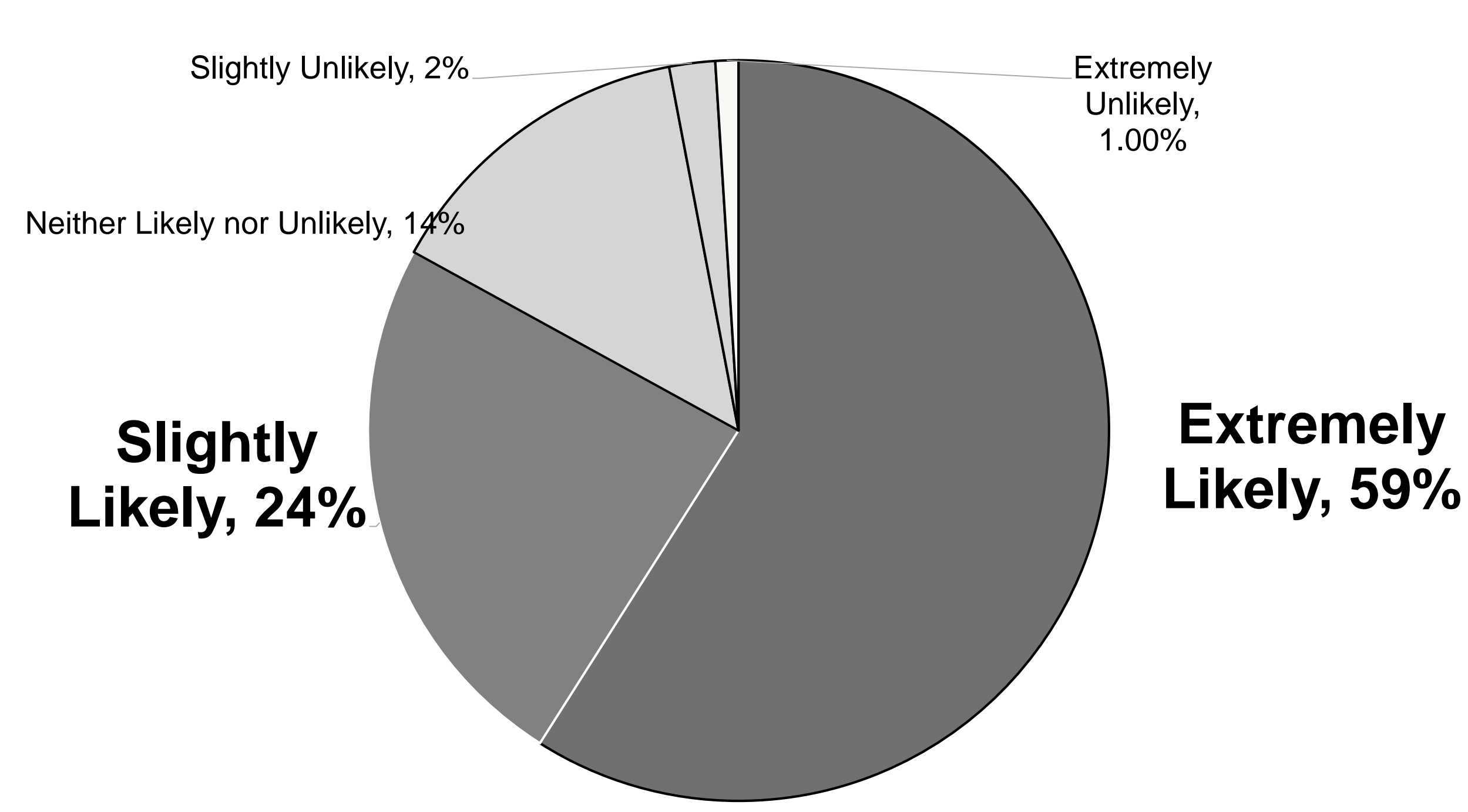
Are prospective teachers interested in having a roommate if housing was provided?



What is the maximum distance prospective teachers are willing to commute to and from work?



What types of schools are prospective teachers interested in testing in?



Are prospective teachers interested in teaching in a low-income school district?


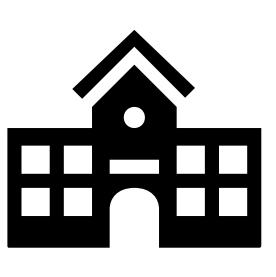
DISCUSSION

Teachers are often faced with a lack of affordable and available housing in rural communities. If we increased the number of places that are affordable to live, then more educators will seek out these areas. Teachers who are starting their careers, may not be looking for a permanent residence, they may prefer the cheaper short-term leases. As our research has shown, the majority of preservice teachers do not want a roommate. However, 47% said they are willing to. If districts provided housing, they may be interested in coming to teach in these areas.

Another issue teachers are facing is driving distances to and from their schools. If school districts were able to provide housing closer to their schools, then more people may be willing to live within these counties. The majority of students in our survey said that they would only be willing to drive a maximum of 45 minutes to work. For some counties, this is a far stretch given that there are no homes or apartments for rent nearby.

Another thing that we can help teachers with is helping them supply their classrooms. Some teachers receive very small allowances while others do not receive anything. Teachers usually fund most of their class needs out of pocket. Class sets of essential items such as books, calculators, or lab equipment can quickly add up. If districts provided funding for teachers toward classroom supplies, it would create a learning environment that inspires creativity and that engages the students into their own learning process.

4 Step Plan of Investment in Education

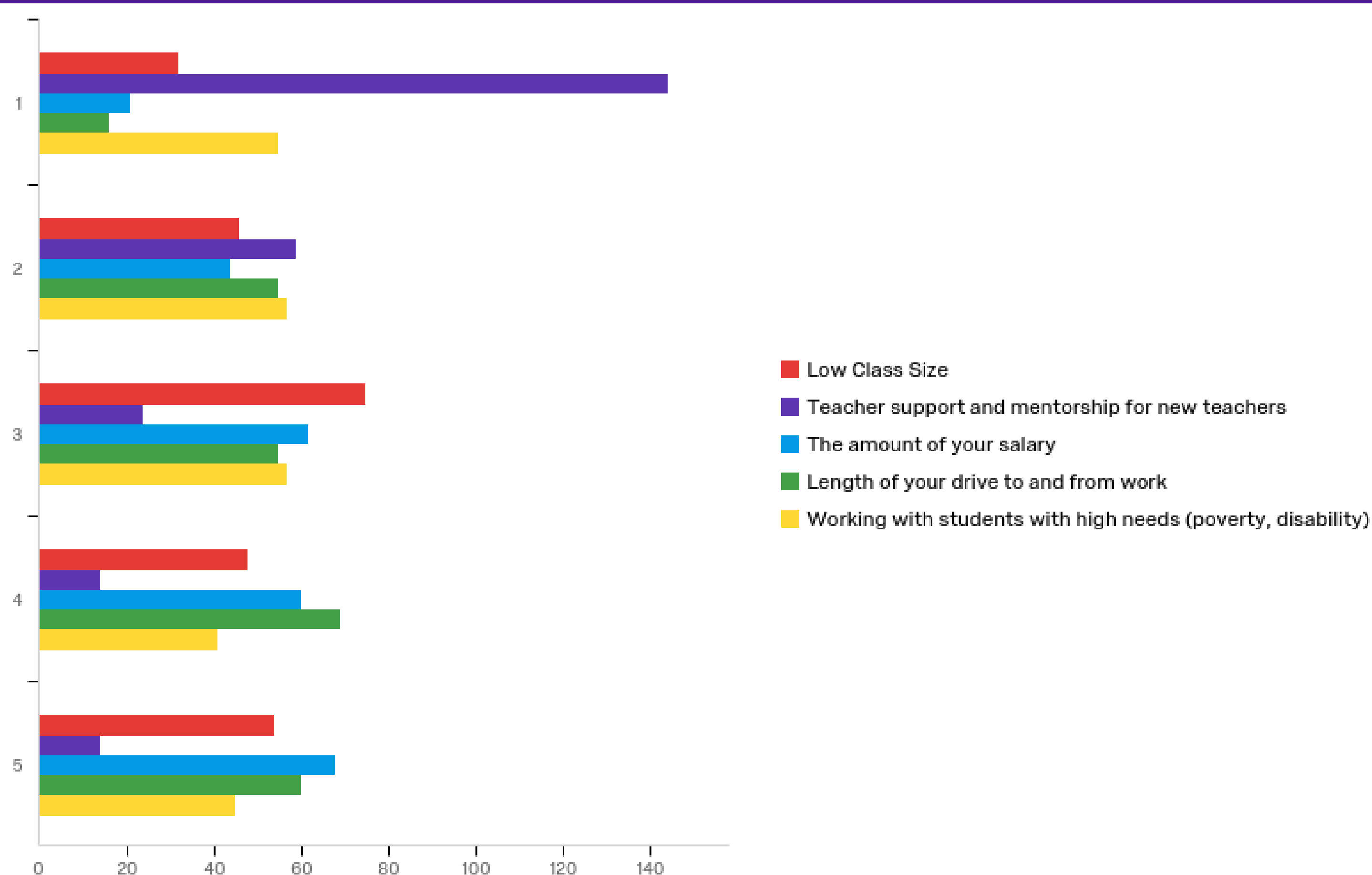
-  Invest in **Affordable and Available** housing
-  Invest in our **Teachers**
 - Supplements, Mentorship
-  Invest in our **Students**
 - Low class sizes, expanding programs for lower income families
-  Invest in **Recruitment Opportunities**

Solutions to Advance Rural Education

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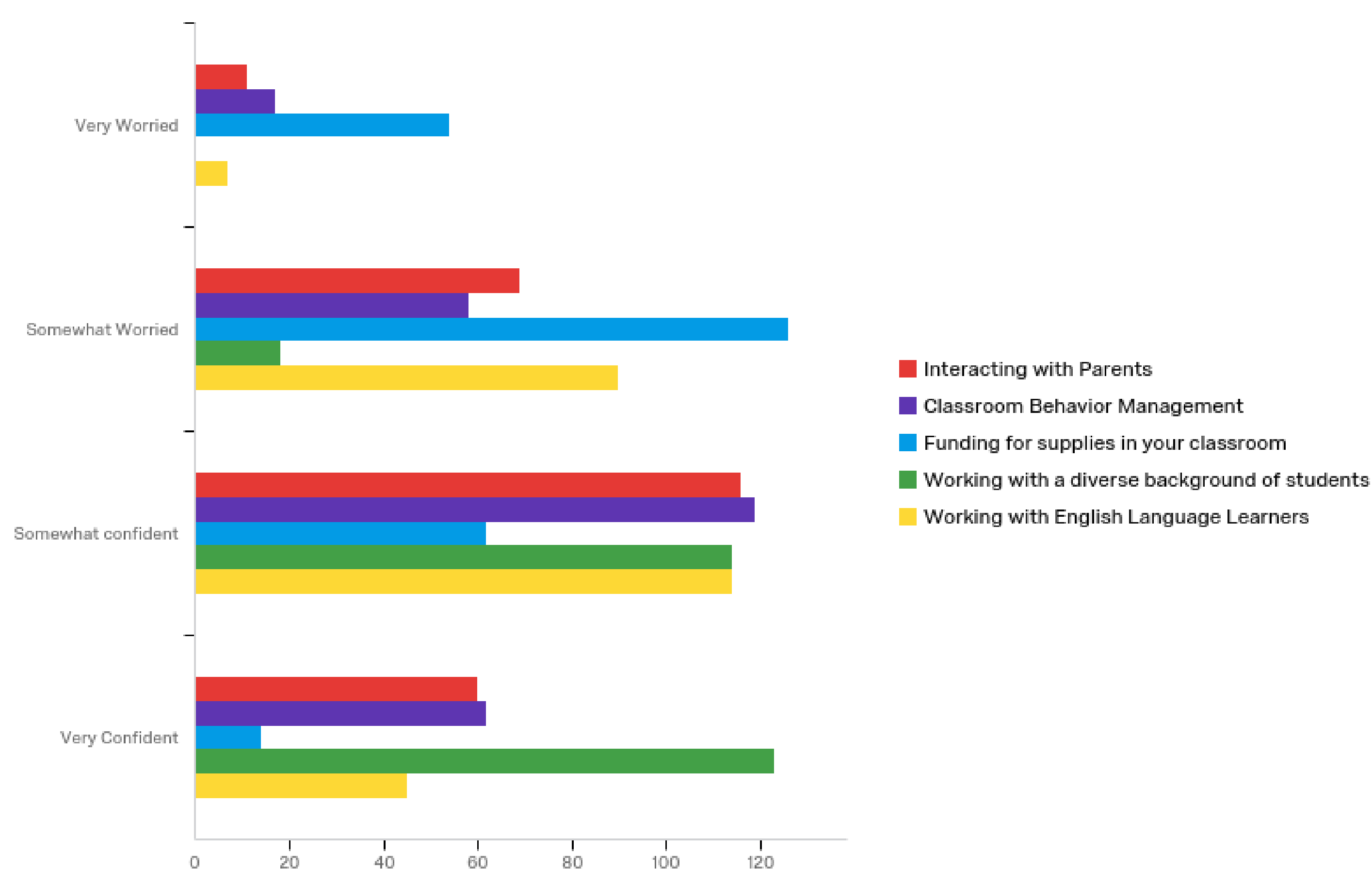


What values are important to prospective teachers?



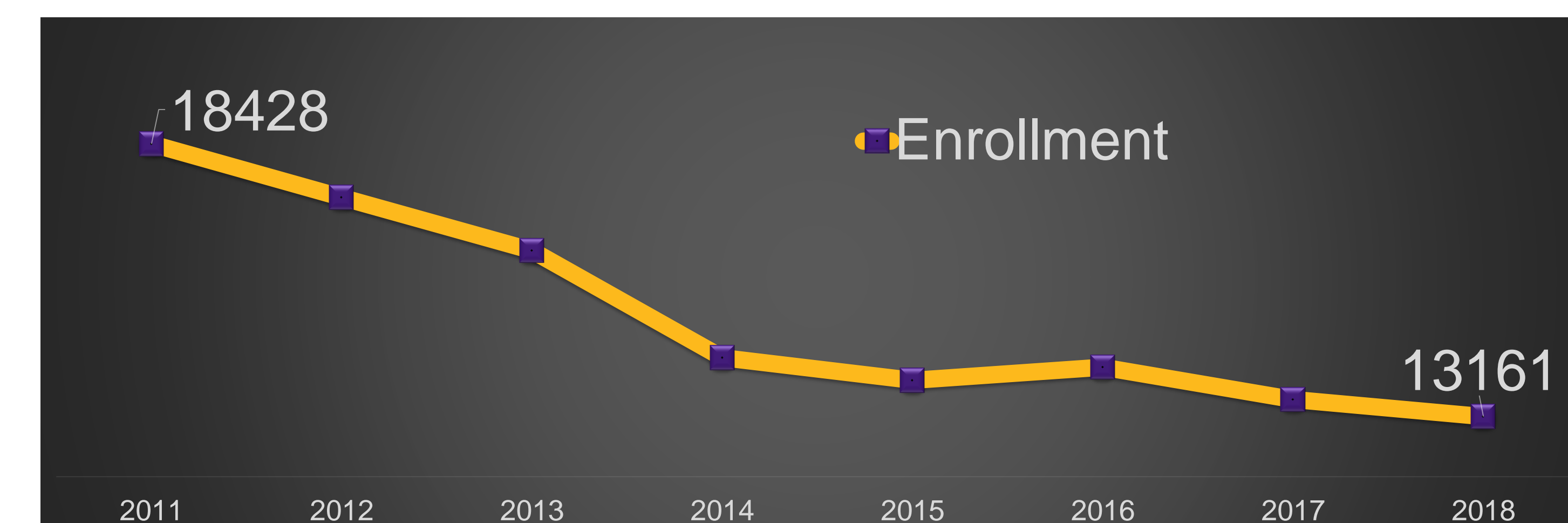
The most important values that interest prospective teachers are support and mentorship (as displayed in figure 8). This is understandable since the surveyed population was prospective new teachers. Rural counties can offer more one-on-one attention with mentor teachers and administrative officials. This is very important to new teachers because they are still learning their content, lesson planning, classroom management, and their growing responsibility in the school. The next most important value for teachers is working with students with high needs. The majority of individuals who go into education, do not go into the profession for the money or benefits. They go into the profession because they would like to make a difference. Working in rural communities will provide an opportunity to work with a larger population of minorities. This can make the job more difficult yet rewarding. The third most important value for teachers is low-class sizes. The increase in class sizes has become a growing problem in the age of teacher shortages and budget cuts. Low-class sizes put less stress on the teacher and allows them to provide the students with more attention. Students benefit from low-class sizes because it allows teachers to work more one-on-one with them and it allows the teacher to learn about them on a personal level.

What are prospective teachers most worried about?



New and incoming teachers are most worried about funding for their classroom. Some teachers will receive a small allowance to help them fund some supplies within their classroom. However, this money does not expand to cover needed materials such as books, lab supplies, calculators, interactive activities, etc. The majority of things you will see within the classrooms is teacher funded. With a lack of funding, this can become a major issue and can make it, so classrooms do not have all the things they need in order to be more a more effective learning environment for their students. Teachers are also worried about working with ESL students. It can be very difficult working with students when there is a language barrier. This creates an obstacle between the student and the teacher. This issue can make learning more difficult for the students. If there is a way to help improve communication between the student and teacher, then this could become less concerning for new educators.

Enrollment in UNC District Universities



It was also discovered that 53% of incoming teachers from East Carolina University would like to work at a public school. However, that does leave 47% of them considering non-public school options. Aside from public school, 17% would like to teach in a private school setting and 16% would like to teach in a charter school. There is a major teacher shortage within our public school system and our students experiences the majority of the affects. This makes it so that our students in rural public schools are not getting the best quality education that they can receive. There is less one-on-one instruction and our teachers are being stretched. Many teachers are leaving because the pay and benefits of teaching in other types of schools may be higher than public schools. We need more teachers to come and remain at our rural public schools to help provide our students with the best education.

Teacher recruitment and retainment have been a difficult task for rural communities. Every year, more teachers are retiring or leaving the profession. This has created a great need for teachers to fill into the position that is left vacant. North Carolina is not producing enough teachers. In 2018, there was a total of 13,161 post-secondary students enrolled in an Educator Preparation Program in the UNC system universities. This number is low compared to 2011 when we had 18,428 students enrolled in Educator Preparation Programs (The University 2019). The number of enrollment has been steadily dropping since 2011. If we are not producing teachers, the teacher shortage will continue to grow. Students' are realizing that being a teacher comes with its challenges and obstacles. Therefore, people are looking into other careers. In order to recruit and retain perspective teachers we need to create incentives to encourage them to teach in these districts.

Special Thanks

- Kristen Cuthrell (Faculty Advisor)
- Jessica Chittum (Faculty Advisor)
- East Carolina University: College of Education
- Terah Archie (Junior Advisory Board Advisor)
- East Carolina University: Rural Education Institute
- East Carolina University: Division of Research, Economic Development and Engagement at ECU

And all the other people and organizations that made this possible

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