Keeping Teachers

APM Reports Documentary Transcript

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary.

Hayes: Growing up I believe I had one in elementary school.

We asked a bunch of people a question about their time in school when they were kids.

Montage of voices:

I had one…

Oh – when I was in school. I can only recall two.

Ah, one…

Um, zero…

Zero.

What were we asking people about? The number of black male teachers they had. In public schools in America today, only 2 percent of teachers are black men. Two percent. That's alarming to Robert Parker. He's a teacher in Philadelphia.

Robert Parker: We should have our schools, the places that are educating the next generations, our schools should look like our country.

But the teachers in our schools do not. More than half the kids in public school are students of color – but the teachers are overwhelmingly white women. This has consequences.

Emily Hanford: There is a whole bunch of research that shows the lack of diversity among American teachers is a really pressing issue.

Smith: Here's our correspondent Emily Hanford.

Hanford: So, for example, black students are half as likely as white students to be placed in gifted and talented programs, even if they have the same test scores. But, when those black students are taught by a black teacher, the racial gap in gifted assignment pretty much disappears.

Smith: Research shows teachers tend to underestimate the abilities of all students of color, but the starkest differences show up when researchers look at white teachers and black kids.

Hanford: When it comes to discipline, white teachers are more likely than black teachers to find behavior problems with black kids. One researcher actually estimated that if schools doubled the number of black teachers, the disparity in suspension rates between black and white students would be cut in half. And there's other research that found having just one black teacher in third, fourth or fifth grade reduced a black student's chances of dropping out of high school by nearly a third. For black boys from very poor families, having one black teacher cut their chances of dropping out by 39 percent.

Smith: But black teachers are becoming increasingly rare. There were actually fewer black teachers in American public schools in 2012 than there were in 2008. It's not entirely clear why, but part of it is that black teachers are more likely than white teachers to leave their teaching jobs.

From APM Reports, this is *Keeping Teachers*. I'm Stephen Smith. We have two stories this hour. First, we're going to explore why there are so few black men in teaching – and why they're leaving. And we'll meet a group of guys trying to do something about it. Then, we travel to a remote corner of West Virginia where the school system is losing teachers faster than it can hire them. What we'll see is that schools in poor rural areas are facing many of the same challenges as poor schools in cities when it comes to finding and keeping the teachers they need. There is lots

of research that shows there may be nothing more important in the educational life of a child than good teachers. Schools that can't find and keep good teachers put kids at a disadvantage for the rest of their lives.

We begin our story at a high school in Philadelphia. Our correspondent Emily Hanford takes us there.

Hallway sounds: "Yo, what's up Mr. Parker."

Emily Hanford: We're in the hallway between classes at Simon Gratz High School. Teacher Robert Parker is chatting with his students as they file into class.

Robert Parker: Ah look who's up here on time, on time!

Gratz is in a North Philly neighborhood known as "Nicetown" – but you have to walk through a metal detector to get in. It's one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. About half the families here live below the poverty level.

Parker: All right, let me get all voices off.

(***Sound of bell. Door shuts***)

The bell goes off, the door shuts, and class begins.

Parker: All right, so, today we're going to a lot more…

Mr. Parker is a history teacher and he looks like it. V-neck sweater, checkered tie, glasses, a scruffy goatee. But he's as surprised as anyone that he ended up a teacher:

Parker: I always heard the negative sides of being a teacher. There's not enough pay. It's too hard. The kids don't listen.

Who'd he hear all this negative stuff from?

Parker: I mean teachers when they would complain (*laughs*) in class, just when we were giving them a hard way to go, I don't get paid enough for this.

He grew up in Philadelphia, went to public schools.

Parker: There were fights that would break out and teachers would get involved and you know, seeing teachers cry because certain stuff may have

happened to someone. It was just like, I don't know if I would want to be in their shoes.

I talked to a bunch of black male teachers and heard the same story over and over.

Raymond Roy-Pace: (*laughs*) Never in my wildest imagination did I consider teaching.

Raymond Roy-Pace went to public schools in Philadelphia too. He wasn't going to be a teacher - because he hated school.

Roy-Pace: I never felt that teachers like really expressed an interest in who I am and what I had a concern for. They never thought to you know engage me beyond just knowing information, but not applying that information, not creating something from that. That never happened for me. So I spent a lot of time in classrooms just bored. And I would doodle on the side of my paper.

Contrast what you just heard from black men with this from a white woman.

Nicole Shirk: I never saw myself doing anything else. From the moment I was five years old, I had an amazing kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Pounds. And she

inspired me, she just cared about kids, she loved kids, and I wanted to be able to give that back to other children as well.

(*Music*)

That's Nicole Shirk. She grew up in an affluent, mostly white suburb. School was good to her. No reason not to be a teacher. But if school was not good to you, why would you choose - as a grown up - to go to school every day? If school were a better experience for black boys, maybe more of them would want to be teachers.

Of course, some black men *do* want to go into teaching – but the people around them say, "Don't do it." That's what happened to William Hayes. His mom and his aunts – who were all teachers – told him he should do something else.

William Hayes: I ranked high in my classes, I definitely succeeded academically and had all the skills necessary to go be whatever I wanted. I think they saw that as somewhat limiting, to just be a teacher.

Hanford: you can do better than that?

Hayes: Yup. Especially I think as a black male, with a lot of promise, particularly a full academic scholarship to go off to school. And so just

thinking about my financial outlook, they wanted me to go into a career that would provide that.

They wanted him to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. He became a teacher anyway. Robert Parker, the history teacher at Gratz High School? After college, he became a financial specialist for Nationwide Insurance. But he didn't like it.

Parker: And it was just kind of like, man, there's more to life than just sitting here at a cubicle, processing, talking to banks from time to time, it was just kind of like, this is not what I really envisioned doing.

He started teaching an evening life skills class for teens coming out of juvenile detention. It felt more meaningful than insurance, but it was frustrating – it seemed too late, like he couldn't help the kids that much.

Parker: And there was a quote that really motivated me.

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" – it's a quote attributed to Frederick Douglass.

Parker: and it was like a light-bulb went off in my head when I heard that quote – I was thinking, what's the best way, how can I reach and change the trajectory of some of the young men and women from communities that were similar to mine. And I started thinking, like, a school. A school would be the best way. Because I can engage hundreds of kids.

So even though teaching didn't look so great when he was a student, he decided it was the best way to try to make the kind of change he wanted to see in the world.

(***Audio from class video***)

Mr. Parker teaches African American history. Today his students are in small groups learning about the Civil Rights Movement, some watching a video, others reading an article.

Parker scene: Where are we?

Kid: we just got done reading.

Parker: all right, let's go. What is this telling us about our city?

When Robert Parker decided to become a teacher, there was a hitch: He wasn't certified to teach. Very few black men choose to study education in college - which

is how most teachers get certified. Robert's way in was through a charter school network where he could teach and get certified at the same time. Right away he was recognized as the teacher who had a knack with the kids who were causing trouble.

Parker: Students who wouldn't do their work in class. They would call me in to have talks with certain young men.

(*Music*)

He could connect with these kids. They grew up in the same kinds of neighborhoods, had similar life experiences. Robert's dad was murdered when Robert was in elementary school. Students would tell him they felt like other teachers – white teachers – didn't really understand the things they were going through. For Robert it felt good, to be needed like this. But also, it was exhausting. It wasn't just that other teachers were calling on him to deal with their toughest students; he seemed to have a whole lot of those kids in his own classes too.

Parker: Like, why do I have this, the roughest group? Why do I have this group of all of these challenging students?

He wasn't the only black male teacher in the building. In fact, there were several, which is rare. And they all seemed to be getting the toughest kids.

Parker: We all started realizing that we all have the same group. You have 'em for math, you have 'em for science, I have 'em for history. And then that's when it started to click – ah, I see why.

Sterling Grimes: Send them to the black male teacher, the black man in the building, and he'll get them in line.

That's Sterling Grimes, also a teacher in Philadelphia. Every black male teacher I talked to brought this up: they're expected to be the disciplinarians. It's not just a Philly thing. In fact, it's such a pervasive problem in schools across the country that there's a name for it. It's called the "Invisible Tax." Teachers of color - especially black men - are admired for their classroom management skills, their way with tough kids – but often, they're seen as only that, and not as great teachers. They don't get tapped to teach the advanced classes. When it's time for a promotion, they're asked to be the administrator in charge of discipline. And they're expected to be the experts on everything related to race and cultural diversity.

Weaver: When certain things happen, you're the go-to.

This is Jovan Weaver – once a teacher in Philadelphia, now a principal.

Jovan Weaver: You know when it's time to talk about diversity, you're the go-to. And that's a horrible position to be in. Because you're not a spokesperson for all black people. I'm not a spokesperson for all black men, by any stretch. But yet I'm viewed that way.

Nearly seven in ten teachers in Philadelphia public schools are white. Being the only or one of the few black men in your school building is not uncommon, and a few years ago Sharif El-Mekki started hearing from a bunch of these guys.

Sharif El-Mekki: "Hey, you have time for coffee?"

Sharif El-Mekki has been a teacher and principal in Philadelphia for more than two decades – he's the one people tell you to call if you're looking for advice from a veteran, especially a black male. The men he was meeting for coffee? They were all saying pretty much the same thing.

El-Mekki: I'm frustrated. Is this the right thing for me?

Some of them were ready to quit.

El-Mekki: I asked them all one day, like, "Hey, can we all just start meeting together?"

They met up at a black-owned restaurant – Caribbean food.

Grimes: I went to this dinner meeting and there was a table full of black men talking about education.

Parker: We went around, introduced ourselves, and then we just started talking about our struggles.

Hayes: We didn't have to talk about, you know, what it means to be in a school, you didn't have to explain the challenges of being a black man in this system. We just kind of felt that – and had a natural conversation.

They met every month – 17 of them – for a year. The second year, some of the guys proposed opening it up to more people, maybe some kind of back-to-school event for black male teachers. This is Raymond Roy Pace.

Raymond Roy-Pace: We created like an Event-Brite. We had like 130 people who signed up in like less than two weeks.

El-Mekki: I'm like turn that thing off. What do you mean? How do? I'm just trying to think how do we convene 130 people in a restaurant?

(*Music*)

They found a bigger space, had the event on a cold and rainy night, and pretty much everyone showed up. The district superintendent – a black man named William Hite - he came. And the U.S. Secretary of Education at the time - Arne Duncan - sent a letter expressing his support. Clearly, they'd hit a nerve. They gave themselves a name – The Fellowship – and became a nonprofit. Their goal is to more than double the number of black male educators in Philadelphia - a thousand by 2025. The way they plan to do it -- retain the black male teachers they've got, hire more, and convince black boys to consider teaching.

(*Hall ambi*)

We're at a high school in Philadelphia, an imposing old building in need of repair. Paint is peeling, sinks are out of order. Philadelphia and other urban districts have been hammered by budget cuts in recent years. But on the benches by the school entrance there are pillows covered in colorful African fabric and there's gorgeous student artwork on the walls.

Roy-Pace: I'm just going to tell you about who I am, how I got into teaching, and then I want to turn it over to you for whatever questions you may have…

In the auditorium, Raymond Roy-Pace tells his story to a group of students. This is the Fellowship's "Why I Teach" tour. Black men visit schools to talk about why they teach.

Roy-Pace: I grew up here in Philadelphia, I grew up in North Philadelphia where for most of my upbringing I lived in the projects. And I started playing football, ended up earning myself a football scholarship. Along the way lost a lot of friends. Some were killed. Some just got caught up in their circumstances because their support systems was less than the factors that are going on in their lives so they kind of got caught up and lost in the mix of it all. Ah, so I earned myself a football scholarship and I just knew I was going to go to the NFL and I was going to make it. Get my grandma a mink coat with the hand warmer and I was going to buy my mama a house. That was the goal, right?

There are about two dozen students here. The principal wrangled them from lunch.

Roy-Pace: Questions, comments?

Mr. Roy-Pace has finished his personal story. He got hurt, no NFL, ended up working as a case manager with truant kids, got disillusioned with how broken the system was, and realized – much the way Robert Parker did – that teaching was a better way to make a difference. His audience looks skeptical.

Student: So you said that you like, grew up in North Philly, right? So, did you ever feel as though, like, when you was a kid, that when you went to school, like, none of this really applied to you? Like you never?

Roy-Pace: I think to be honest, for most of my educational career I was bored.

His argument to these kids - become the kind of teacher you wish you had. As the conversation continues though, it becomes clear that some of these students are kind of afraid of the idea of teaching. They don't want to do to other kids what they feel has been done to them in school.

Saamir: So my biggest fear is, um, I would fail my students. And I wouldn't be able to create the proper curriculum for them to succeed in life. So, I feel like

that would be a main thing that would hold me back from ever actually teaching.

That's Saamir. His friend Tamir convinced him to come today. Tamir is a student member of the Fellowship. He's already been persuaded that teaching is the way to go.

Tamir: All the brothers just came together and was like, education is the thing! Dr. Hayes, Grimes, El-Mekki, all of them, and I was like, this can be actually something dope, this is something I can actually do that's fulfilling.

Tamir is a junior in high school. He had his first black male teacher two years ago.

Tamir: Kay offered a different type of classroom.

Mr. Kay was his 9th grade English teacher. What Tamir liked best about Kay is that he didn't just stick to the standard English curriculum. They talked about history and politics and current events. And race. That topic – race – had always felt a bit left out in school.

Tamir: It was always this is the slavery unit, we're going to look at a presentation. We're going to hear about Rosa Parks and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

And that was it. Black history was over and done in a couple of weeks and racism was treated like an historical event. But talk to Tamir and Saamir or any black kid about their life experiences, and race and racism are right there, demanding to be talked about – whether it's being called the N-word on the bus, being followed by a security guard at the store, or having your middle school counselor tell you you're going to be a statistic.

Tamir: I'm going to become the kid that stands on the corner and drops out of high school.

That's what a counselor said to Tamir. In Mr. Kay's English class, they discussed things like that. Tamir says it was a relief to be able to talk about race in school. Not that white teachers can't lead these kinds of discussions, but often they don't think to.

Hayes: There was a point where I realized that white people don't really talk about race.

This is William Hayes again - the one whose mom and aunts discouraged him from going into teaching.

Hayes: Race is something we talk about all the time in the black community. I don't think there's a day that goes by that we don't talk about it.

But for white people, talking about race can be uncomfortable.

Michele Johnsen: I hate it sometimes too because I'm like, I don't want to talk about it.

Michele Johnsen - who's white - has been teaching elementary school in Philadelphia for more than a decade. She says when she started teaching, she was one of those people who said she didn't see color.

Johnsen: You know, I love everybody and I think you, from doing this for a long time, you come to realize A, you can't say that because you know, not seeing color is not seeing a person.

And B, her students saw color - they saw that their teacher was white, and would ask questions about her skin, like did she wear sunscreen? I tell Michele Johnsen about the research that shows white teachers tend to underestimate black kids and I ask if she thinks she's ever done that. It's a tough question. And it's hard for her to answer because she's never thought about how she views black students versus white students, because in all of her years teaching she'd never had a white student - until this year, she happens to have one. All of her other students – every single one – has been African American.

(*Music*)

I'm going to ask you to pause for a moment to consider what that says about how segregated American schools are. A decade of teaching. No white kids. More than 60 years after Brown versus Board of Education.

One reason schools are so segregated is that neighborhoods are. The neighborhood around the school where Michele Johnsen works is almost all African American. It was once a thriving industrial area, but now the streets are dotted with empty lots and boarded up buildings. It's like time stood still here while other parts of the city moved on. The school in this neighborhood is John Wister Elementary.

Weaver: Good morning ladies… I'm going to try to get you today, okay?

That's Jovan Weaver, the principal at Wister. He's outside greeting students before school.

Boy: Hi principal Weaver.

Weaver: Have a good day, all right buddy.

Wister is what's known as a turnaround school. Because of low test scores the school district turned Wister over to the Mastery Charter School network in 2016. For principal Weaver - who's one of the leaders of the Fellowship - leading a turnaround was an opportunity to hire an entirely new staff. He focused on recruiting as many black men as he could. Twelve percent of his teachers are black men, triple the average in Philadelphia public schools.

Bahir Hayes: All right, sit down, take out your homework silently and I can give you the next direction. All right, go ahead…

Bahir Hayes teaches 5th grade at Wister. Today his students are discussing a book about Hurricane Katrina.

Hayes: Give me some details about the destruction that was going on in New Orleans? What were some of the destruction that had occurred? Ah, yes, Tamir? Mold. Mold. What else?

Mr. Hayes runs a thorough discussion. But he lets it go off topic a bit too.

Hayes: Officer E? Who's officer E?

Kids: The cops…

A student named Kysir mentions that some cops were bothering him the other day when he was riding his bike. Some of the other students were there too.

Hayes: What was the indicator that they were pulling him over?

Kysir: whoop, whoop … that's the sound of the police. The other cops don't chase me around my hood.

Hayes: The other cops don't chase me around my hood?

Mr. Hayes says black kids - especially boys - need teachers who can talk to them about interacting with police.

Hayes: This is very real for them. You know, rich or poor, as a black man, you can get harmed.

He can tell them stuff like - when *he* gets pulled over, he hands over his school ID first – whoops, sorry officer, wrong ID - so the police officer knows he's a teacher.

Jathiya Singleton: To know that my son can look up and this person that you're looking to for so many answers looks like you is crazy, awesome to me. Like, I don't even know how to explain that.

This is Jathiya Singleton. Her son is in Mr. Hayes' class.

Singleton: I walk here every day in the same neighborhood. All of these children see men that are doing things that are not what we want our children to be doing but they get to come to school and see an African American male in authority and dressed up, you know looking nice, and this is somebody that teaches you I think is changing the whole picture that children have about African American males. A lot of them don't have a male in their home.

She says when a school has a lot of black men in it - it's just different. One example: if kids at Wister are upset about something, they're allowed to go to the gym and shoot hoops for a few minutes.

(*Sound of ball bouncing*)

Weaver: I'm about to play basketball with one of my faves.

Weaver in gym: You going to go to your spot now, huh?

Principal Jovan Weaver has a standing basketball date with a second grader.

Weaver: He has you know a few issues so we just built an incentive, once he's done with his reading rotations, at 1:00 every day, he gets to join me. We can shoot around a little bit.

(*Ball bouncing*)

Weaver: I'll let him win, sometimes. But I'm very competitive, so most of the time I win.

Weaver in gym: This is it right here! This is for all the marbles…

It's a very sweet scene, Principal Weaver – in slacks and dress shoes - and a second grader with a huge smile on his face, trying to hit a three.

Weaver in gym: Game, good job.

Boy: Thank you

(*Sound of ball being thrown*)

The boy wins today's game at the buzzer.

There are other things that are different at this school with lots of black male teachers. Hallway transitions, for example. We're in the hall between classes and the kids are loud and lively. But it wasn't like this at the beginning of the year. The kids were supposed to walk silently, in straight lines. Those are the rules at lots of urban charter schools, known for their strict discipline policies. At Wister, there was even an alarm that went off when kids were too loud. Teacher Bahir Hayes complained.

Hayes: For me as a person who has siblings in prison, it reminds me of a prison alarm.

Other black men at Wister said the hallway transitions reminded them of prison, too. This is Vincent Cobb.

Vincent Cobb: I had a kindergarten student come up to me with their hands behind their back and a bubble in their mouth.

A bubble in their mouth – blowing your cheeks out so you can't talk. That's how this boy was told to keep quiet in the halls.

Cobb: I've heard other black male teachers and administrators say like I hate that. I hate it, I hate it. Because it does – it reminds you of prison.

So, because a bunch of black men in the building spoke up about it, the school changed the policy. No need for silence and straight lines anymore in the hallways at Wister.

(*Music*)

The guys in Philadelphia trying to increase the number of black men in teaching – the full name of their group is The Fellowship: Black Male Educators for Social Justice. Their mission is inextricably tied to bettering the prospects for black students - boys especially – but they are clear that *all* kids need black male teachers. Here's Robert Parker.

Parker: If you can get black males into all schools – private, parochial, suburban, rural schools – if we can be in all of these places, it could really help with the perception of race in our country.

But recruiting more black men into schools will not solve the problem of so few black men in teaching. Because for some reason, black teachers are more likely to leave than other teachers. They have the highest turnover rates. I tracked down a couple of black men who had quit their teaching jobs to ask them why they think black men are leaving.

Ty Taylor: My hat's off for all the people that love the education field that much to stay in it. But, it just wasn't me.

I meet Ty Taylor at his house where there are moving boxes stacked up against the wall. He's about to move to Cleveland after more than a decade teaching in public charter schools in Philadelphia.

Taylor: Just felt like I was doing the same thing each and every day. Just felt like I was going through the motions.

He says he wanted to try new things – but administrators at the schools where he worked wanted teachers to teach in a certain way.

> **Taylor**: Basically the kids just listen to you, and they supposed to suck up all the information you just tell 'em and that's it. Lot of the places want the students in the classroom completely quiet. That's how a productive school is to them.

There was a lot of pressure to raise standardized test scores. And the kids with discipline issues were always being sent his way. The invisible tax. Ty says he got burned out. Quit abruptly in the middle of the school year.

> **Taylor**: There was a mountain on the shoulders of a teacher, and it makes them crack sometimes.

I ask if he ever considered teaching in a suburban school. He says no. He went into teaching because he wanted to work in urban public schools, with kids like him. He's moving to be a strength and conditioning coach for the Cleveland Browns. It's an internship that pays less than his teaching job, but he says happiness matters more to him right now.

(*Sounds of walking up steps and knocking on door*)

I caught up with a guy who did ditch the city for the suburbs – I tagged along while he knocked on doors, asking for votes.

Kyle Boyer: Hey, how are you? Sorry to bother you on a Saturday. Just introducing myself. My name Is Kyle Boyer and I'm running for school board, region 2.

Kyle Boyer is running in the suburban school district where he grew up. He's also a teacher here, after four years teaching in Philadelphia. He's happier in the suburbs.

Boyer: I'm trusted. I get feedback, but I'm trusted. I'm allowed to innovate, I'm given leadership opportunities fairly regularly and easily. And all those things lead to fulfillment.

He did not feel this way in Philadelphia. His experience was like Ty Taylor's: lots of rules, little freedom to do what he thought was best for his students. When I ask Kyle if he thinks being a black man had anything to do with why he left, he says this.

Boyer: Black men are people. And the statistics and the data show that people don't necessarily want to work in high-stress environments.

(*Music*)

What you find when you dig into the data is that the overwhelming majority of black male teachers work in high-poverty urban schools. Teachers of color in general are two to three times more likely than white teachers to work in these schools. And there is something about many of these schools that is driving teachers out. You might expect the stress comes from working with kids in poverty, kids with so many needs. But surveys show that's not why black teachers are leaving. Teachers who quit are more likely to say they're fed up with the way their schools are being run. They cite micromanagement, lack of influence and autonomy, and frustration with standardized testing. Black men are leaving teaching because they're in schools where working conditions are not conducive to long, fulfilling careers for anybody. The irony, of course, is that research shows teachers matter more than anything else in a school. And schools that can't find or keep the teachers kids need put kids at a disadvantage for the rest of their lives.

(*Music)*

Stephen Smith: You're listening to Keeping Teachers, a documentary from APM Reports. I'm Stephen Smith.

Rural schools are facing many of the same challenges as urban schools when it comes to holding on to their teachers. Up next, we travel to West Virginia coal country where one in five teaching jobs is filled by subs or uncertified teachers – and it's having a big impact on students.

> **Cierra**: I don't know any math. You can hand me like a freshman year math and I'm like, 'um, no, I don't know, I'm sorry.'

We have more about this documentary on our website, APM Reports dot org. You can find links to the research about why black teachers matter and dig deeper into the data on why they're leaving. You can also explore our archive of education documentaries. We have programs and podcasts about how people learn, the rising cost of college and much more.

And speaking of podcasts – do you know about Educate? That is our education podcast. You can hear our documentaries there, and keep up on education throughout the year with a new Educate episode every two weeks. Subscribe at educatepodcast. org.

Part 2

The first time Debbie Krabbe drove into the county where she would eventually become a teacher, she turned to her husband and said.

> **Debbie Krabbe**: Man, this reminds me of Detroit. The buildings are decaying, the curtains were kind of flying in and out of the window. There's nothing left. There's no industry left, there's no business left.

SS: They were in rural Appalachia -- McDowell County, West Virginia. Debbie's husband was in the military, they'd lived all over. She'd get teaching jobs wherever they ended up.

> **Krabbe**: I kept thinking in the inner city is where my calling was to help children because I had done a lot of work with kids in gangs in Fayetteville, North Carolina and in Radcliff, Kentucky. So that's what I thought my calling was. And what I have found here is that rural children and inner-city children have so much in common.

(*Music*)

Debbie Krabbe is a special education teacher in McDowell County. She and her husband live in a neighboring county. Of all the places she's worked, she says McDowell is the place she feels most needed.

Krabbe: I get all my kids addresses and I go look at their houses. If they miss a lot of school, I'm there and they know it. They think they're not going to graduate, I sit on their porch until I interrupt enough of their life that they're coming back. Because later on they'll appreciate the interruption. Education, I mean really, it's the only way out.

This is Debbie Krabbe's sixth year teaching here. She says she's committed to this place. But McDowell County can't find enough teachers like her.

Nelson Spencer: We don't have many choices when we have applicants.

That's Nelson Spencer, superintendent of the McDowell County Schools.

Spencer: We have vacancies every year that we're unable to fill in some of our upper-level courses such as the higher level maths, the chemistrys, the physics.

They were having such a hard time finding foreign language teachers that they cut those positions all together. Now kids take foreign language online. When teachers do come, they often don't stay.

Anne Marie Gentry-Vance: I've seen good people come and go.

Anne Marie Gentry-Vance is a high school history teacher in McDowell.

Gentry-Vance: I've made friends, thought they were going to stick around, and for one reason or another they've left.

Between 2013 and 2016, the McDowell County schools hired a total of 137 teachers. In that same period, they lost 163. I'll repeat that. Hired 137. Lost 163. This in a school system that employs about 275 teachers. When a teaching position is vacant, it's filled by a substitute - typically someone who's not certified to teach in that subject area. A social studies teacher could be teaching math, for example. Across

the county, close to one in five teaching positions were filled by subs or uncertified teachers last year. Superintendent Nelson Spencer.

> **Spencer**: That's not good for our kids' academic achievement. We know that. But at this time it's the best we have to offer them.

What's happening in McDowell County is happening in rural schools across the country. They can't find and keep the teachers they need. It's not a new problem, but it's getting worse as larger forces continue to tear away at the economies of rural America. As long as there are kids in these communities, though, there must be teachers. Our correspondent Emily Hanford visited McDowell County to talk to people about the teacher shortage, the effect it's having on kids, and whether anything can be done about it.

Emily Hanford: It's not easy to get to McDowell County. There's just one main road in and out – a winding two-lane that follows the curves of the Appalachian Mountains. People came here for the coal in those mountains, building homes on the sides of steep hills where it does not seem houses should be. Coal mining once employed about 65 percent of the working population here. Today, it's less than 20 percent. The government now employs more people than the coal companies, and the largest employer is the McDowell County Schools.

Turley (in class): When I say "*fine*," what does it mean?

Kids: Stop!

Ann Turley: Stop

I visit Welch elementary school, where Ann Turley teaches music. She divides her time among three schools, a modern-day circuit rider delivering music education the way itinerant clergy once saved souls. Today she's teaching first graders.

(*Class music*)

Turley: One, two, ready, go!

The kids are walking in a circle, tossing balloons to keep count with the music. There are 18 students including a redhead wearing a tie. It's his first day. His parents just moved here from Mississippi as part of a mission group trying to help McDowell County.

Turley (in class): Hold. *Fine*, *fine*.

McDowell County is in the poorest part of West Virginia. It ranks second in the nation for prescription drug overdose deaths and has one of the lowest life

expectancies of any county in the United States. Nearly half the students in McDowell County Schools live with someone other than a biological parent. Ann Turley says she sometimes questions whether she's the right person for the job.

Turley: Because I feel like I need to be a counselor, a social worker. Or somebody with a little more crisis intervention kind of skills.

Just this morning, the father of one of her fourth graders died after being shot in what a police spokesman said was a drug-related incident.

(*Sound of walking up steps*)

After school, I go home with Ann Turley.

Turley (at home): Now this was the first one finished and we were the first occupants (*Sound of unlocking front door*)

Ann and her husband Briane live in what's known as the Teacher Village. "Village" is a bit of a stretch – it's a couple of abandoned homes that a local nonprofit has fixed up and turned into apartments specifically for teachers. Briane's on the phone when we walk in.

Briane: Well that is a great blessing I appreciate it.

Ann and Briane moved to McDowell County six months ago. They're both from West Virginia, Ann from right here in McDowell. They'd lived other places for years, but with their son grown and their elderly mothers in need of assistance, they decided it was time to move back home.

Briane: 750 square feet as I have reckoned it.

Briane's giving me a tour of their apartment. In urban areas, affordable housing can be a big issue for teachers. In rural areas, it's housing, period. There aren't many rentals. What's available is often rundown. Another issue in rural areas? A job for your spouse. Briane had been a college professor and a minister. He has a Ph.D. When they decided to move back to West Virginia, they both started applying for jobs.

Ann Turley: He probably had about five times as many applications out there as me because I don't have a lot of experience at anything.

But she got the first offer. She'd done some teaching and had her teacher certification.

Turley: They were so desperate here I was taken sight unseen.

Didn't even have to do an interview. Briane, on the other hand, couldn't find a job.

Cathy Jack (in car): Ah, this car is really a mess. I'm so sorry.

I wanted to get a better idea of what's in McDowell County so I got a driving tour from Cathy Jack.

Jack: I've been here my whole life. My brother and sister moved away. But I stayed.

Cathy Jack has been a teacher here for 35 years.

Jack: My grandparents came here from the Eastern Panhandle in 1924 to get teaching jobs. And they lived in that house – the whole time they were married. Raised my mother and her two brothers.

Hanford: So your family came here for education, not for coal?

Jack: Yes, actually they did! (*laughs*)

The U.S. Census puts McDowell County's population at its peak in 1950, when nearly 100,000 people lived here. When Cathy was growing up, the city of Welch, the McDowell County seat, was known as "Little New York."

Jack: On Saturdays, I mean the streets were full of people. And we had women's stores, men's stores, shoe stores, toy stores. You didn't have to go outside of Welch to buy anything. We had so many stores in downtown Welch.

Today, there are fewer than 20,000 people left in McDowell County.

Jack (**in car):** And we're going through downtown Welch…

There's a mortuary, a Social Security office, a barbershop – but mostly, the buildings are empty.

Jack: There used to be a dry cleaners right there...

There's a "time stood still" quality to this place – kind of like neighborhoods I visited in Philadelphia – but this place is so much more isolated geographically. To get to a major store from Welch, you have to drive more than 30 miles. It could take an hour on the winding two-lane, more if you get stuck behind a coal truck. Convincing people who aren't from here to move here is a tall order. But there aren't enough qualified people in McDowell County to staff the schools. Just five percent of people here have bachelor's degrees. So the schools have to go out and recruit.

> **Tonya White:** We are at Concord University for a career fair in the hopes to recruit some teachers… Hi, good, how are you?

Tonya White is the personnel director for McDowell County schools. Concord University is in a neighboring county. Tonya's here with her administrative assistant, a can of Mountain Dew, and a stack of job applications.

> **White**: If the past is any indication of what today is going to be, it's going to be many different school systems kind of fighting for the same kids.

By kids she means the soon-to-be college graduates wandering among the recruiters' tables. A recruiter from a neighboring district comes over and hands Tonya and her assistant a book of resumes from another job fair – McDowell couldn't afford the fees for that one. They start flipping through the resumes. Plenty of people who want to teach elementary school. Slim pickings on high school math.

White: Hi ladies. How are you all?

A couple of soon-to-be graduates stop by – Devin Graham and Amber Shrewsbury.

White: So, you guys going into teaching?

Women: Yes, elementary ed

White: OK, great. Thinking about McDowell, maybe?

Woman: Well, we're a little higher, I'm Raleigh, borderline Fayette.

No, they're not really thinking about McDowell. Here's what they say when I pull them aside.

Amber Shrewsbury: Umm, more as a last resort kind of thing, I guess. But as of right now I would drive pretty much anywhere, as long as I had a job.

Devin Graham: We're going by that "beggars can't be choosers" rule as of right now, when you're fresh out of college you really can't be picky.

They say they might take a job in McDowell for a year or two, but their dream is to teach in the district where they grew up. That's not a surprise. More than 60 percent of new teachers teach within 15 miles of their hometown. More than a third take their first job in the district where they went to high school. The implications of this are sobering for a place like McDowell County where only about 40 percent of high school graduates go on to college, and most college graduates don't come back. But this high school junior, Cierra, says she will come back.

Cierra: I plan on being a biology teacher and coming back to McDowell. Right now I just want to make it different than what it is.

She's bitter about the fact that so many teachers come and go.

Cierra: When I come back, I want to fix it. I want to make it where that student's going to learn what they need to learn and that student's going to learn what he needs to learn and I'm not going to just ditch my students.

This year her math teacher quit abruptly after Christmas and a sub with no training in math education filled in. She had lots of subs in 9th and 10th grade math too.

Cierra: I don't know any math. You can hand me like a freshman year math and I'm like, "Um, no, I don't know, I'm sorry."

She's worried about whether she'll be ready for college.

Cierra: When I get into college, I gotta take college math. But how am I supposed to do that if I don't know "back to basics?"

Her classmate Brice says he feels bad for teachers who get stuck teaching a subject they don't know. They try their best, he says. But…

Brice: Sometimes your best is not enough.

Brice thinks more teachers would come – and stay -- if they were paid better. But it shouldn't be about money, says Cierra.

Cierra: You gotta help McDowell. I mean it's not just all about the money. I mean, I don't want to be a teacher for the money. I want to be a teacher

cause someone's gotta re-do the education system! (Brice interrupts, fade down)

Brice and Cierra get into a bit of a spat. She says people who grow up in McDowell and go to college have an obligation to come back. He says he'd love to be able to do that but…

Brice: As it is now, I don't think I could for what I want to be.

He wants to be an accountant.

Brice: I love it here, but it's just, I have to build a foundation for my family. And right now, there's not much to build on.

(*Music*)

This is the dilemma for so many people. They want to stay, but they just can't. I ask teachers what they would do if they didn't have teaching and they say things like – "McDonalds?" "The Rite Aid?" There's a hospital. The county government. One woman was a deputy sheriff before becoming a teacher. And there are the prisons. Three of them. A federal prison opened in 2010, promising 300 jobs. But fewer than

one in five employees is a McDowell County resident. Part of the problem is that many people here couldn't pass the drug test.

Emily Hanford at the Turleys' house: Hello – how are you?

Turleys: I'm good, how are you?

It's been a few months since I've seen Ann and Briane Turley, so I stop by their apartment. Ann's the music teacher. Briane was looking for a job, and he's found one at the Stephens Correctional Center. He's the prison librarian.

Briane: Some days I go in and somebody is asking me for the latest Gary Larson.

That's the "Far Side" cartoon guy.

Briane: And a few minutes later someone will come in and ask me for Plutarch or some Hellenistic classic work.

He likes it.

Briane: I'm sometimes in a room by myself with 24 felons and I come home saying, 'It's great. The inmates are just great. They're very respectful. They like what I'm doing. And Ann has had the really tough day. (*She laughs*)

Ann Turley: The 5th graders.

She had a particularly bad day with her 5th graders on Monday.

Turley: Just the level of disrespect some children I don't know if I could ever interest them in what I'm doing but yet they are intent on being – I don't know how to describe 'em, some of 'em – attention starved and they'll get attention however they can get it.

Some days she thinks about quitting.

Turley: Days like Monday, if I had days like that every day, I would have already left.

But - she and Briane like living here. They've made friends. They hike. They're thinking about buying a house. Ann is a bit worried, though, that she might not have a job next year. This is something teachers here worry about. Because even though this county is desperate for teachers, every year, some of them get laid off.

Tonya White: It's hard to explain to someone who hasn't been in it because it don't make sense.

This is Tonya White again, the personnel director.

White: The state department makes – they do a formula. And it determines how many positions that they will fund for you to have. And it's based on your student enrollment.

And every year, McDowell County loses students. This year, the West Virginia Department of Education told McDowell it was over formula by 15 teaching positions. So in March, Tonya White drove to the schools where positions were being cut and met with each teacher getting laid off.

Hubert Mullins: That was a scary day.

That's Hubert Mullins. And this is his wife Jessica Mullins.

Jessica Mullins: They called me in first.

Jessica and Hubert Mullins are special education teachers at the same elementary school in McDowell County.

Jessica: And as soon as I was finished they called him over the intercom to report to the office so I thought to myself, 'yes, yes, we are both losing our jobs today.'

That music you hear in the background - it's the song that comes over the school intercom every day at dismissal. To hear more about the Mullinses' story, I visited them at home in the evening.

(*Sound of walking up steps*)

That's me walking up the steps to their front door. 43 steps. One of those houses built into the side of a steep hill.

(*Sounds of knocking, cat meows*)

That's their cat Oliver. They have several cats, all named after Dickens characters.

Hanford: Oh, wow, I'm envious. What a great house.

Their house is beautiful. Built-in cabinets with leaded glass doors, a huge fireplace. Four bedrooms, two and a half baths. They bought it for $15,000.

Hubert: I think right before us it was a drug house. Because when we first moved in, all hours of the night, people would knock on our door and we would always say, "It's closed, new management."

Hubert and Jessica are both from McDowell County. They met working at Walmart.

Jessica: I was reading one of his favorite books in the break room.

It was a novel called The Lovely Bones. The Walmart where they worked was in McDowell County, but it shut down in 2016, taking 140 jobs and tens of thousands of dollars in tax revenue with it. When Walmart closed, Jessica had already convinced Hubert to go to college with her. Their fathers were coal miners. They were going to be teachers.

Hubert: We always said, you know, they always need teachers. But – the population is just leaving in droves and where they might have needed 5 teachers before they'll need one.

Jessica and Liam: Whoops (*giggle*) wiggle worm

That's their three-year old, Liam. The Mullinses' teacher training was interrupted when they had him and they're still working on their teacher certifications. That's why they got laid off. They're at the bottom of the seniority list and West Virginia has strict rules that teachers with the least seniority must be laid off first. Now the Mullinses are thinking about the possibility of leaving McDowell County.

Hubert: Right now, it's scary because we know this area and that's all we've ever known.

Jessica: We're small town, rural people. We really are. And it would be a huge adjustment for us to just move somewhere where we didn't know everybody.

Hubert: It's a reality now. We never thought that it would be.

(*Music)*

They're hoping maybe Hubert will get his job back. Jessica's position was eliminated. His still exists – it just had to be offered to another teacher with more seniority. They've heard that teacher is looking for a job somewhere else.

The teacher problem in McDowell County is complex. The chaos and uncertainty caused by annual layoffs don't help. But Superintendent Nelson Spencer says there's not much he can do about it. It all goes back to what's going on with the local economy. What would really help, he says, is a road. A modern four-lane highway in and out of the county.

> **Nelson Spencer**: It would open us up, really, basically, is what it would do. And it would bring in a better economy. We would have more people to stay, more people who want to stay. You would have developers in.

People have been talking about the need for this highway for a long time.

> **Spencer**: (*Laughs*) It has been since I was a young man and now I'm not near a young man any anymore.

There's renewed hope that something will happen. A new governor who's talking about the highway. And President Trump and his promises on infrastructure. Nelson Spencer says even if a new highway didn't lead to much economic development, at least it would make it easier for teachers to commute here. Close to a third of McDowell teachers don't live in McDowell County. But ultimately, it's the teachers who live here and grew up here, people with roots in this community, who are the

most likely to stay for the long haul. That's why personnel director Tonya White has started a "grow your own" program. The idea is to sell students in McDowell County on the idea of becoming teachers and coming back home.

White: If I can't recruit 'em, I'm hoping to raise 'em (*laughs*).

This year she started a McDowell County chapter of Educators Rising – a national organization that tries to get high school students on the path to teaching careers. An interesting note – the Fellowship in Philadelphia has a started a local chapter of Educators Rising too. Since so many teachers prefer to work close to where they grew up, "grow your own" is kind of an obvious and necessary solution for schools that can't find and keep the teachers they need. In Philadelphia and other urban school districts the question is whether teachers will choose to stay given the working conditions in many of the schools. Here in McDowell County, the question is - will there be any children left to teach in another generation or two?

(*Music*)

Just a few last notes about the story in McDowell County. Hubert Mullins got his job back. The teacher who was offered his position did indeed take a job in another county. So, the Mullinses are staying in McDowell – at least for now. Ann Turley, the

music teacher? She did not get laid off. And despite her struggles with that 5th grade class, she's coming back for another year of teaching. She and her husband Briane just bought a house.

(*Music)*

Stephen Smith: You've been listening to *Keeping Teachers* from APM Reports. It was produced by Emily Hanford and edited by Catherine Winter. Our associate producer is Suzanne Pekow. Our digital editor is Andy Kruse. Research help from Jeffrey Bissoy-Mattis, Josh Marcus and Lila Cherneff. Fact-checking by Eva Dasher. Mixing by Craig Thorson. The APM Reports editor-in-chief is Chris Worthington. I'm Stephen Smith.

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