

A Solution-finding Report

Title: *Improving Student Outcomes in Rural Districts and Schools*

Date: October 27, 2010

Introduction

Some problems faced by rural schools and districts differ only in magnitude from the problems of their urban and suburban counterparts: low student performance, poverty, attracting and retaining high-quality teachers, dropouts, drug use, and inadequate funding, for example. On the other hand, rural schools face problems which urban and suburban schools can address more readily because of the established infrastructure and accessibility of resources. In rural communities, school improvement, which rests on strategies such as professional development, supplemental educational services, school choice, offering advanced placement courses, and so forth, is simply more difficult and expensive because of isolation and the distances that individuals and groups must negotiate to take advantage of these strategies. Although technology can lower some of these hurdles, the systems that can best take advantage of the potential for E-communications in rural areas simply cost more than similar systems in urban and suburban settings, according to George E. Norris, superintendent of Richmond County (NC) School District (see the brief video at <http://vimeo.com/6318243>, retrieved October 20, 2010). Furthermore, many rural districts have declining populations and therefore a declining local tax base and reduced appropriations from already depleted state coffers.

Although this *Solution-finding Report* was prompted by a request from the U.S. Department of Education, it is intended to help state and local educators confront the pressing problems many rural schools. It presents a selected and annotated bibliography divided into two sections. *Section I* lists useful federal, state, and organizational websites that are concerned with rural education; these websites may be consulted periodically to track developments. *Section II* provides links to research reports and briefs, as well as to U.S. Senate testimony by rural school personnel, with the intention of showing what rural schools and districts are doing to improve student achievement and students' readiness for work and college.

Solution-finding Reports are intended to provide a quick response to the request for information; they are not intended to be definitive literature surveys or syntheses of given topics.

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I. Federal, State, and Organizational Websites

Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center. (n.d., webpage). *Rural Education*. Charleston, WV: Author

<http://www.arcc.edvantia.org/resources.php?toolkit=626>

This webpage provides abstracts and links to documents concerning “current policies and issues that affect rural education and to address the particular educational challenges of rural districts and schools.”

Community Foundation of the Ozarks. (n.d. website). *Rural Schools Partnership*. Springfield, MO: Author.

<http://www.ruralschoolspartnership.org/>

“Recognizing the overarching importance of schools to rural development, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks’ board of directors has launched the Rural Schools Partnership, a comprehensive program to strengthen small school districts. The Rural Schools Partnership resulted from a year-long planning process involving CFO’s regional committee, public school leaders, affiliated foundation leadership, donors, and area business people.

“The Rural Schools Partnership embraces three consensus-based strategies for strengthening rural schools:

- Develop alternative resources
- Promote collaborations and partnerships
- Support place-based education strategies”

The organization also manages the Ozark Teacher Corps, which provides scholarships to college students who commit to three years of teaching in rural Missouri.

National Research Center on Rural Education Support. (n.d., website). Chapel Hill, NC: Author.

<http://www.nrcres.org/>

“The National Research Center on Rural Education Support (NRCRES) was established in 2004 with funding from the Institute for Educational Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. This center is based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill....The NRCRES has conducted four research programs to help address the issues faced in rural education.

- [Targeted Reading Intervention: A Rural Early Literacy Initiative](#), which examines the issues that face children as they begin their education.
- [Rural Early Adolescent Learning Program](#), which examines the issues that face students during the transition to early adolescence and helps teachers support youth during this period.
- [Distance Education Program](#), which examines the role that distance education can play in rural schools, especially for enrichment and advanced level courses.
- [Rural High School Aspirations Study](#), which examines rural high school students’ aspirations and preparatory planning for postsecondary education, career training, and adult life.”

New York State Center for Rural Schools. (n.d., website). Ithica, NY: Cornell University.

<http://www.ny ruralschools.org>

Funded by a contract with the state, the New York State Center for Rural Schools “aims to be a leader in solving systemic problems and improving opportunities, practice, policy for rural schools and the communities they serve. The Center is working with many partners to assist rural communities and the state of New York to (re)create socially and economically vibrant communities across the state of NY.

“The Center has begun building connections among key constituents, capacity for data access, research, and programmatic support to schools, and knowledge through high quality and interdisciplinary research on timely and important problems facing rural New York State schools and the communities they serve.”

The website focuses on connecting rural schools with the community; building capacity, particularly through its integrated data system and accompanying tools, now in a beta version; and conducting and disseminating research concerning rural districts in NY. Currently, the site offers research reports and briefs on implementing universal preschool, finance and district reorganization and consolidation, and school-based healthcare.

The Rural School and Community Trust. (n.d., website). Arlington, VA: Author.

<http://www.ruraledu.org/>

“The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Our mission is to help rural schools and communities get better together.

“Working in some of the poorest, most challenging places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, and advocates in a variety of ways for appropriate state educational policies, including the key issue of equitable and adequate funding for rural schools.

“The Rural Trust publishes the monthly newsletter *Rural Policy Matters*, which provides news of interest to citizens and community groups working on state-level policy issues affecting rural schools. In addition, the Rural Trust maintains a website. We have an active publications program that includes *Why Rural Matters*, a biennial snapshot of the condition of rural education in each of the 50 states, and numerous special reports and white papers.”

Resources may be searched according to the user (administrator, parent, teacher, etc.) or topic (capacity building, curriculum, policy, etc.). Topics tend to focus on community organization, rural community advocacy and activism, rural school reform, issues in funding equity (state, Title I, i3, Race to the Top, etc.), and consolidation of rural districts.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library. (n.d., website). *Rural Education*. Washington, DC: Author.

http://ric.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=5&tax_level=1&tax_subject=575

This webpage provides links to resources for rural schools and communities, including federal government grant funding.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d., website). *Navigating Resources for Rural Schools*. Washington, DC: Author.

<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/RuralEd/index.asp>

“This site is designed for persons who are interested in educational changes taking place in rural America. The site provides access to recent data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as well as access to resources available through selected contractors and grantees of the U.S. Department of Education.”

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d., website). *Rural Education Achievement Program Coordinators*. Washington, DC: Author.

<http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/freedom/local/reapstatecontacts.html>

This ED webpage provides contact information for each state’s Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) coordinator.

II. Research Studies, U.S. Senate Testimony, and Rural School Strategies

American Youth Policy Forum. (2010, April). *Challenges, Assets, and Innovations: Considerations for Secondary Education in Rural Communities*. Washington, DC: Author.

<http://www.aypf.org/tripreports/2010/documents/AYPF%20Rural%20Education%20Brief.pdf>

“This brief summarizes the lessons learned during a February 2010 AYPF study mission to North Carolina that examined how rural education systems are providing high quality instruction and improving the readiness of young people for life beyond high school. Participants learned about how federal and state policies and funding streams affect rural school districts; the unique challenges of providing high quality instruction in rural settings; and innovative approaches to providing comprehensive education in rural communities. The brief outlines several key issues affecting rural education nationwide and discusses how current federal policy priorities affect rural education.”

American Youth Policy Forum. (2010, February). *Preparing Rural Students for Success Beyond High School*. Washington, DC: Author.

<http://www.aypf.org/documents/Final%20Rural%20Ed%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

This brief defines and describes rural education in the United States, summarizing key issues confronted by rural schools and districts. It then discusses North Carolina’s responses to those issues and gives two examples of rural NC high schools servicing poor communities where few students continue their education beyond high school. One of these high schools has focused its college readiness/improvement campaign on developing students’ critical thinking and technological literacy. It has introduced new instructional strategies—project-based learning and student-directed classes—and supplied every student with a computer in every class. The second exemplary high school, located on community college campus, has implemented a 5-year early college program which “places a heavy emphasis on creating a personalized learning environment and fostering student-teacher relationships.” Upon completion of the program, which includes a

required internship, students receive both a high school diploma and either 2 years of college credit or an associate's degree.

Beesley, A. D., & Barley, Z. A. (2006). *Rural Schools That Beat the Odds: Four Case Studies*. Denver, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/RuralEducation/5051RR_Rural_Beat_the_Odds.pdf

This 36-page study reports on measures taken at four schools in response to requirements of NCLB. Each of the schools—one elementary school, one high school, and two junior-senior schools—in four different rural communities with differing state and local resources, are unique but “provide success stories from which other schools can glean ideas for their own success.”

Brinson, D., & Rhim, L. M. (2009). *Breaking the Habit of Low Performance: Successful School Restructuring Stories*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute.

<http://www.centerii.org/survey>

This case study examines “five [urban and rural] schools that successfully restructured. By current accountability standards, these schools had long-documented histories of poor performance and failed efforts to improve. At each of these schools, multiple factors enabled them to kick the low-performance habit....[The] primary focus is the process of successful restructuring. These stories convey how these schools with a long history of low performance and failed change initiatives finally broke the habit of poor performance and radically improved outcomes for students.”

The rural school studied, a 78 Grade middle school in Box Elder, Montana, serves a Native American population with a high poverty rate and limited access to resources. Restructuring, therefore, did not involve dismissals of staff but rather developing an improvement plan that focused on academics; a request to state personnel to review the plan and make an on-site evaluation; the change from subject-specific to self-contained classrooms; the hiring of two new teachers, considerable professional development for the teachers; efforts to improve behavior, health, and safety; and conveying authority to a “plurality of leadership” rather than a single individual. Student proficiency rates improved from 26% and 33% in math and reading, respectively, in 2005 to 61% and 87% in 2008.

Carter, G., Lee, L., & Sweatt, O. (2009, May). *Lessons Learned From Rural Schools*. Montgomery, AL: The Center for Rural Alabama, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries.

http://agi.alabama.gov/uploads/r7/5w/r75wkW1B6Dsr2VVuI5hx2w/LessonsLearnedRuralSchools2009.pdf?mc_cid=14be37a5e5&mc_eid=81c002752d

“This publication explain[s] what was learned about 10 outstanding rural [elementary] schools and 10 communities that are sprinkled across rural Alabama from near the Gulf Coast to the Tennessee Valley. They offer glimpses of what is possible when expectations, teamwork, collaboration and pride become a way of life.” Findings address school and community culture and expectations, communication, facilities, leadership, and hiring strategies. A profile of each of the ten schools is provided.

Galvin M., & Parsley, D. (2005). Turning Failure Into Opportunity. *Educational Leadership*, 62. Retrieved October 19, 2010 from:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/summer05/vol62/num09/Turning-Failure-Into-Opportunity.aspx>

This article reports on the turnaround of a South Dakota K–6 elementary school with 150 students. According to the authors, the school and its community “are characteristic of small farming communities in the upper Midwest.” After being labeled as needing improvement in 2001, the school showed dramatic gains in the next three years. By 2004, “94% of students achieved ‘proficient’ status on South Dakota’s standardized math test and 100% tested as ‘proficient’ on the state’s reading test.” The authors attribute this improvement to implementation of six strategies: “distributing leadership, developing shared expectations for students, getting hooked on data, focusing on one problem at a time, building a professional learning community, [and] turning a problem into an opportunity for growth.”

Harmon, H. L., & Morton, C. (2010, June). *Frontier Schools in Montana: Challenges and Sustainability Practices*. Montana Small School Alliance. Dillon, MT: Montana Small Schools Alliance, University of Montana–Western.

<http://www.mtsmallschools.org/pdf/Montana%20Frontier%20Schools.pdf>

“What makes Montana’s ‘frontier schools’ unique? Over 200 school districts with 200 or fewer students dot the rural landscape in Montana. Across the United States, over 1,000 school districts with 200 or fewer students remain in rural areas. So small are these school districts that national studies seldom pay attention to them. This report presents results and conclusions from a study of the Montana Small School Alliance (MSSA) frontier schools project. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the perceptions of teachers, administrators, board chairs and community supporters regarding the challenges confronting small, rural “frontier” schools in Montana and the practices that are contributing to their sustainability.”

This 68-page report identifies 22 conclusions, ranging from characteristics of teachers and school boards to pricing of purchase to community support. Responses indicate that the “top five major challenges (most pressing issues) in frontier school districts are low student enrollment, unrealistic federal regulations, inadequate financial resources, mixed grade levels of students in classroom, and difficulty recruiting qualified teachers.” Features that enhance sustainability include mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms and the use of schools for community functions; certain staffing strategies and promoting the reputation of a school; comparison pricing and cooperative purchasing; increasing student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten); professional development and academic enrichment through distance learning; and the community’s perception of the importance of the school to that community in very effectively educating its children and youth.

Hill, J. D., & Flynn, K. (2004, November). *English Language Learner Resource Guide: A Guide for Rural Districts with a Low Incidence of ELLs*. Denver: Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory.

http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Diversity/5051TG_ELLguide.pdf

“This guide is designed help rural school districts with a low incidence of English-language learners (ELLs) develop the capacity to build and implement a comprehensive program that meets both the academic and language proficiency needs of ELLs....

“Low incidence districts, therefore, must seek creative means for delivering services to these students. This guide will assist administrators and teachers in such districts in developing and providing the necessary services.”

IDEA Partnership. (2010). *Many Voices: Rural Education Bibliography*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

http://www.ideapartnership.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=552:rural-education&catid=37:reports&Itemid=60

This webpage provides links to research articles on rural education, with a focus on special education.

Journal of Research in Rural Education. (1982–). State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University.

<http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles.html>

“*The Journal of Research in Rural Education* is a peer-reviewed, open access E-journal publishing original pieces of scholarly research of demonstrable relevance to educational issues within rural settings. *JRRE* was established in 1982 by the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. In 2008, *JRRE* moved to the Center on Rural Education and Communities, located within Penn State University’s College of Education.”

The journal welcomes “single-study investigations, historical and philosophical analyses, research syntheses, theoretical pieces, and policy analyses from multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives. Manuscripts may address a variety of issues including (but not limited to): the interrelationships between rural schools and communities; the sociological, historical, and economic context of rural education; rural education and community development; learning and instruction; preservice and inservice teacher education; educational leadership, and; educational policy. Book reviews and (occasionally) brief commentary on recently published *JRRE* articles are also welcomed.”

Lane, B. (2010). *Transforming a Statewide System of Support: The Idaho Story*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement.

<http://www.centerii.org/survey/>

“The Idaho State Department of Education (IDE) provides a case example of how a state can quickly and dramatically alter its approach to providing support for school improvement, building upon internal capacity and external resources. Idaho’s story also illustrates the complex nature of state-level change and highlights certain triggers and conditions that can help other states to engage in rapid state-level improvement....In three years, beginning in 2008, [IDE] has

transformed its approach to working with schools, revised (or created anew) all the tools that [it uses] with schools around school improvement, and developed a set of institutional partners that strengthen the system, thereby contributing to the sustainability of overall improvement efforts. Perhaps most telling is the fact that by the end of the 2010 school year, many schools and districts not identified for improvement began to request access to the same supports and assistance provided to underperforming schools. In keeping with its tradition of local control and a well-founded reluctance to label schools as chronically underperforming, Idaho is developing a system of support for all schools, not just those identified as low performing by state and federal accountability systems.” Appendices provide several useful planning, implementation, and monitoring tools used by IDE.

Lane, B. (2009). *Exploring the Pathway to Rapid District Improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute.

<http://www.centerii.org/survey/>

“The purpose of this report is to describe a framework for district capacity building and improvement and...to explore how districts can engage in rapid and sustainable improvement efforts. The supporting research, [the] framework, and a corresponding set of rapid improvement indicators [are] provided....Included in the report is a summary of issues for consideration by state officials and districts focused on creating the conditions necessary to catalyze rapid and sustainable district improvement.” Two detailed case studies of rapidly improving districts, urban and rural, provide illustrative examples of “how districts can engage in rapid and sustainable improvement efforts.” The rural district, Burrton Public Schools in central Kansas, reorganized the district office to support improvement efforts, supported collective problem solving, created a culture of shared responsibility and accountability, and built instructional capacity. Over a five-year period, student proficiency rates improved from the 50–60% range to 92% in reading and 88% in mathematics.

National Network of School Improvement Leaders. (2010, July 23). *Supporting Rural Schools and Districts*. (webinar).

<http://www.centerii.org/leaders/archive/>

“How do states provide support for rural schools and districts? This webinar examines statewide efforts to disseminate, institutionalize and sustain strategies for school improvement in small and rural schools and districts, taking into consideration the challenges and opportunities inherent in these communities. Featured presenters are Andrea Browning (American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF)), Bryan Setser (North Carolina Department of Education) and Mark Bounds (South Carolina State Department of Education). Andrea Browning begins the webinar by presenting the context and reporting on AYPF’s latest field trip examining secondary education in rural settings. Bryan Setser shares one of North Carolina’s innovative strategies—the North Carolina Virtual Public Schools—as one state’s approach, using information technology to address the instructional and curricular needs of the state’s students. Mark Bounds discusses how South Carolina addresses the human capital pipeline for the states’ rural schools by profiling the strategies the state uses to recruit, train, and support teachers and principals going to rural schools and districts. Presenters reveal how the various innovations and strategies are designed, implemented, and sustained and discuss the challenges and issues to consider.”

Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., Coleman, M. M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., and Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of Education in Rural America* (NCES 2007-040). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007040.pdf>

This report presents findings based on “a series of indicators on the status of education in rural America. The data used in these indicators are drawn from the most recent versions of NCES’s Common Core of Data (CCD), Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), and Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS).” Its findings are categorized by “demographics,” “outcomes,” and “resources for public schools.”

The Rural Educator: Journal for Rural and Small Schools. (1980–...). Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada, National Rural Education Association.

<http://www.ruraleducator.net/>

This is peer-reviewed journal is the official publication of the National Rural Education Association. Online archives of its volumes (click on “Past Issues”) extend back to 2004, with 3 issues per year.

U. S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP). (2010, July 23). *ESEA Reauthorization: Rural High School Reform*. Gillette, WY.

(a) Testimony of Rollin Abernethy, associate provost for academic affairs, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, and President, Wyoming P-16 Education Council.

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Abernethy.pdf>

The presenter focuses on six strategies that “will advance a more rigorous, effective and seamless educational system and support high school reform.” These initiatives include:

1. A defined and rigorous high school curriculum;
2. Articulations by disciplinary faculty members across grades 9 through 16;
3. The Wyoming P–16 Education Council’s high school and college course comparison charts;
4. Common Core State Standards initiative and comprehensive standards assessment consortia;
5. Teacher preparation at the University of Wyoming; and
6. Engaging the community to support more effective schools.

(b) Testimony of Brandon Jensen, principal, Cody High School, Cody, WY.

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jensen.pdf>

This principal shares his “perspective about how high schools have changed and adapted to meet the diverse needs of students,” strategies being used at his high school “to engage students in their education and prepare them with the knowledge and skills they need for success in postsecondary education and the workforce” the transformation of the school culture to one that is “collabora-

tive, learning-focused, and dynamic.” The speaker also addresses “some of the benefits and challenges that are specific to small rural high schools.”

(c) Testimony of Kevin Mitchell, superintendent, Park County School District #1, Powell, WY.

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mitchell4.pdf>

Superintendent Mitchell outlines the strategic plan of his district and highlights a number of initiatives. The strategic plan discusses for improving student achievement, ensuring effective, efficient operations, and communications with stakeholders. The district high school offers AP classes, collaborates with a college on dual enrollment, and has established grade-level academies to achieve closer student–teacher relationships, thereby reducing school dropouts. It collaborates with local businesses to offer a school-to-work program and job shadowing. Several intervention strategies have been implemented to prevent class failures, including the Lunch Intervention Program, in which students “eat lunch in the media center where they complete missing or incomplete assignments with the assistance of a tutor.”

(d) Testimony of Jim Rose, executive director, Wyoming Community College Commission.

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Rose.pdf>

This speaker’s U. S. Senate testimony concerns preparation for post-secondary schooling and work. He focuses on three themes. He asserts that students “be guided in exploring and developing their own interests for future careers using the career pathways identified by [ED] and adopted by the Wyoming Department of Education.” Wyoming has sought to improve engagement and relevance by enacting legislation that allows high school students both concurrent (on school site) and dual enrollment (off school site or on-line) in college courses. To address remediation in post-secondary institutions, Wyoming is considering joining a consortium of states in developing a common assessment of common core standards. The state has also recently approved a plan “to strengthen linkages between the K–12 system and the seven community colleges.”

(e) Testimony of Lyn Velle, CTE coordinator, Campbell County School District. “Restructuring Rural High Schools—A Career Academy Model.”

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Velle.pdf>

This speaker catalogues the hurdles to be overcome in establishing career academies/pathways in larger rural high schools. High schools with 1000 or more students tend to see decreasing benefits in personalization and motivation from the implementation of smaller learning communities. Campbell County High School, with 1400 students, is in the process of implementing three career academies and phasing one out. The speaker addresses coursework, student and teacher recruitment and interests, teacher preparation and development, curriculum, community collaboration, school counselors, class scheduling, district and building support, physical setting, and so forth.

U. S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP). (2010, April 13, 2010). *ESEA Reauthorization: School Turnaround*. Washington, DC.

Testimony of Tim Mitchell, superintendent of schools, Chamberlain School District, Chamberlain, SD.

<http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mitchell3.pdf>

This speaker reports that students in his poor, high-minority rural district made significant academic gains between 2003 and 2009. He attributes this turnaround to “a relentless focus on instruction and professional development; the cultivation of teacher and principal support; the use of research-based instructional practices and strategies; and the conscious encouragement of collegiality and collaboration among all staff members.”

Williams, D. T. (2010, September). *The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinvigorate Rural Education*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/09/pdf/ruralschools.pdf>

This paper asserts that the challenge of obtaining high-quality, rural education “often comes with difficult odds—inadequate financing, teacher shortages, and inaccessible or unaffordable services for children and families. The partnerships and approach of ‘full-service community schools’ may hold the greatest potential for addressing rural education’s challenges and ensuring that every child has at least a near-equal opportunity to succeed. This paper combines data from the literature and other public sources, interviews, site visits, and the organizational experience of The Rural School and Community Trust in an examination of community schools from a rural perspective. It provides a context for rural community schools and discusses the need for clarification of the language used to describe the concept of community school. Three examples of successful rural community schools [in Kentucky, Vermont, and Maine] provide a framework for discussing the benefits, characteristics, and policy implications of rural community schools....These cases provide guidance and encouragement for low-resource, rural communities that often succumb to poverty and isolation and accept less than they would hope for their children.”