EDUCATING STUDENTS IN RURAL AMERICA:

CAPITALIZING ON STRENGTHS, OVERCOMING BARRIERS

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NASBE
National Association of
State Boards of Education

STUDY GROUP MEMBERS

Andrea Brown, Illinois
Thomas Campbell, West Virginia
Tess Elshoff, Ohio
Maria Gutierrez, Guam
Luisa Iadeluca, New York
Marcia Neal, Colorado
Nancy Perkins, Maine
Mireya Reith, Arkansas
Steve Roberts, Kansas
Madhu Sidhu, Maryland
Richard Zeile, Michigan, Study Group Chair

NASBE Staff

Francis Eberle, Study Group Facilitator
Winona Hao, Study Group Administration
Ace Parsi, Study Group Report Author
Valerie Norville, Study Group Report Editor

STUDY GROUP PRESENTERS

First Meeting, January 24–25, 2014

Bob Klein, the Rural School and Community Trust and University of Ohio – Athens
Andy Smarick, Bellwether Education Partners/Fellow with the Fordham Institute
Jenelle Leonard, US Department of Education
Susan Headden, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Second Meeting, March 14–15, 2014

Jane West, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Robert Mahaffey, Director of Communications, The Rural School and Community Trust
Ron Daley, Hazard Community College, Kentucky Valley Education Cooperative
Rick Gaisford, Educational Technology Specialist, Utah State Office of Education

Third Meeting, June 20–21, 2014

Danielle Farrie, Research Director at the Education Law Center
Tonnie Martinez, Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and the National Origins coordinator for the Midwest Equity Assistance Center in the College of Education at Kansas State University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One-third of the United States' approximately 100,000 public schools are in rural areas, and these schools enroll nearly 12 million students—a quarter of all American students (figure 1).[1] Rural schools defy easy definition. They also defy generalities, as becomes apparent when one tries to equate rural schools in Alaska with those in Louisiana, or Colorado's with Appalachian schools.

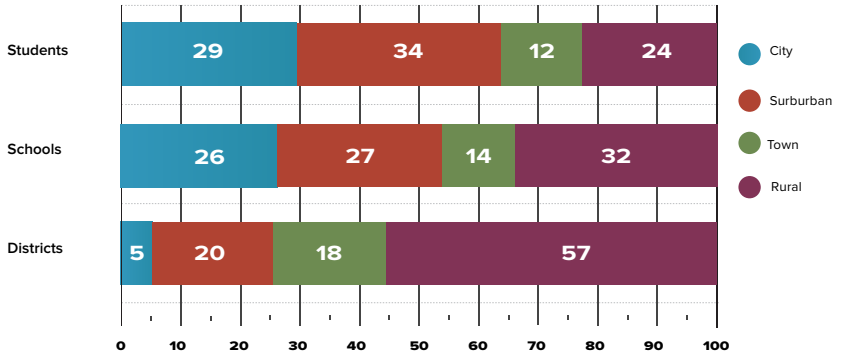
Census data nonetheless make clear that the racial and ethnic diversity of students in rural schools is increasing: 26.7 percent of all rural public school students are minorities, and many of them are living below the national poverty line.[2] The demographic diversity and the complexity of culture in rural schools require public understanding and policy attention.

Diversity, persistent poverty, multiple cultural identities, and isolation (due to geography, culture, or sometimes, lack of broadband) provide the backdrop for many rural schools. And while rural schools face the same mounting requirements to respond to new educational reforms and administrative tasks as urban schools, they do so with very limited staff. These administrative burdens take relatively more time away from instruction than they do at better staffed schools.

Students in rural schools often thrive despite these challenges. They are more likely to have smaller, more personalized learning environments with higher levels of community support.[3] Access to technology is better than it was 10 years ago, albeit still uneven. And students have more options than in the past for advanced work, including dual-credit options.

In 2004 the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) released an issue of its journal, the *State Education Standard*, devoted to issues facing rural schools, including teacher retention and limited funding. Ten years later, NASBE hosted a Rural Education Study Group to discuss what remains unchanged and what new challenges require state education policy leaders' attention. The study group, comprising

Figure 1. Distribution of public elementary and secondary students, schools, and districts by locale, school year 2010-2011 (percent)



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members from 11 states, sought to highlight rural public schools' needs and help policymakers better understand the complexity, challenges, and opportunities that rural education stakeholders face. The group identified key issues in rural education: the high percentage of children living in poverty, especially minority children; insufficient funding; educator retention and support; limited and uneven access to technologies such as broadband; and isolation of small communities and schools.

Group members first identified factors that make rural schools different from suburban and urban schools: uneven broadband access and capacity to leverage it, geographic isolation, and the lack of funding and staff capacity. They then identified four areas that state policy can address:

1. **Technology Access and Training.** Many rural areas still lack access to broadband. Many of those that do have access find simply installing broadband does not equate to high-quality teaching and learning. Such teaching and learning requires states to also consider how technology can enhance students' learning experiences. To ensure students benefit from learning opportunities facilitated by technology, the study group encourages states to map geographic areas that lack access to broadband, marshal resources to address the needs in these areas, and leverage capacity and professional learning to translate technological access into high-quality learning.

2. **Partnerships and Collaborations.** The geographic isolation of rural communities often keeps residents insulated and excluded from exposure to careers and extracurricular activities available in urban and suburban areas. To overcome this isolation, states can help rural communities form partnerships with local organizations as part of broader economic and community development strategies, and states can publicly recognize communities whose students are benefiting from such partnerships.

3. **Flexible Funding.** Rural areas struggle to meet administrative demands created by education reforms that were designed with the greater staff capacity of urban and suburban schools in mind. In order to better empower rural schools to meet their students' needs, states should consider addressing these burdens with more funding, greater flexibility, and incentives for districts to build stronger connections between each other and with service providers to build capacity and save money.

4. **Capacity Building.** The dearth of highly capable teachers and school leaders is a problem not unique to rural schools. It can, however, be more acute in this setting. States can more proactively develop a comprehensive strategy to recruit, train, and retain the teachers, principals, and educational support staff needed to ensure all its students are provided a world-class education.

Education policies often seek to identify deficits and address them. This can be misguided when it comes to rural education, which of necessity must focus less on deficits and more on capitalizing on assets already present in rural communities. By seeking a balance between addressing deficits and better deploying existing assets, this report and its suggested policy actions are designed to enhance the capacity of rural areas to prepare all students for college, careers, and civic life.

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From large agricultural areas in Arkansas to Indian reservations in Montana, rural schools share a common characteristic: They are called to do more with less. The principal may be the school's instructional leader but also drive the bus. Teachers may cover multiple disciplines and grade levels. For such schools, small changes in requirements for federal or state funding or reporting represent substantial shifts. America's rural schools have not shied away from preparing their students for an ever-changing world, but they have had to be creative.

Change over the last decade has brought not only challenge but also opportunity to rural schools: greater access to dual-credit options, technology, and new resources made available through public and private partnerships.[4] By seizing these and other opportunities, rural schools continue to outperform their urban peers in achievement, graduation, and other outcomes.[5]

This success should not encourage complacency. Academic success has been uneven across states. While some states have seen marked improvement, others face intractable challenges. Nationally, around one in five rural high school students fail to graduate high school, 42 percent of fourth graders attending rural schools scored at or above proficient in National Assessment of Education Progress math and 34 percent scored at or above proficient on reading outcomes.[6] Some students in rural areas, such as migrant students, face some of the most difficult barriers to learning anywhere in the country.[7]

The Rural Education Study Group began by discussing issues that were considered important in the past. The group found that some that had been critical before—access to technology, educator and staff capacity, and financial constraints—continued to be, although recent national developments raise new complications. For example, while lack of communications technology was important in 2004, the use of online state assessments, materials, and professional learning has raised the stakes for increasing technological capacity. Similarly, financial constraints have always been severe for rural schools, but the fiscal downturn and new initiatives and reporting requirements placed added burdens on staff, who have always had to take on multiple roles. After identifying these and other challenges, the study group sought best-practice policies to address them. They are highlighted in this report, along with state examples, to help members of state boards of education learn from their peers and devise solutions to address their own state contexts.

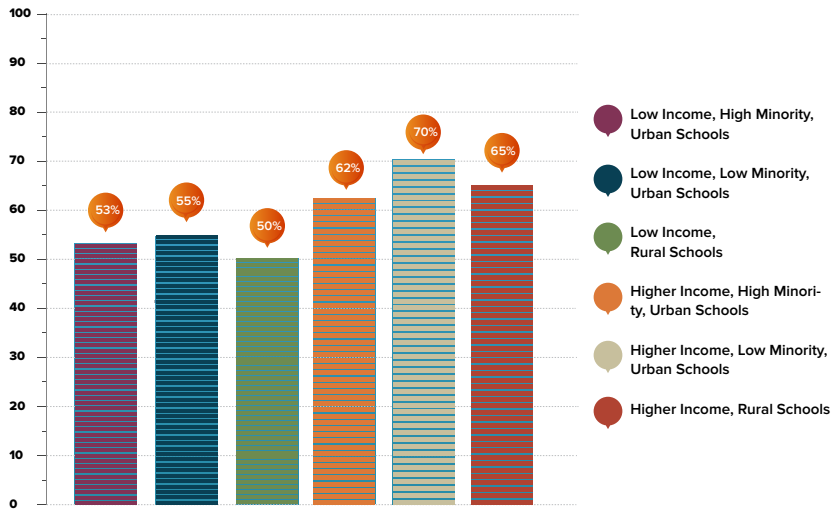
Discussions on education matters often gravitate toward "deficits" schools face and devising "fixes" to address those deficits. The NASBE study group went further: While the group addressed reduced staff capacity, diminished funding, and increased demand for higher achievement and greater student engagement, it also considered assets that exist in rural communities that could be marshaled in the service of rural schools. Potential partners, local economic development strategies, and a prevailing rural culture that bonds schools to their communities were identified as strong points of leverage for rural schools.

Some of the policy opportunities include facilitating partnerships to bring greater resources and supports to schools, creating strategic statewide technology plans, relieving rural schools of some of the burden of regulations that limit their ability to use resources optimally, and developing the capacity of educators to meet the modern-day challenges of rural schools.

Issues in Rural Schools

Rural schools contend with many of the same challenges as their suburban and urban peers: implementation of new college- and career-ready standards, assessments, and accountability systems; increased student poverty, mobility, and diversity; and limited resources. Additional contextual factors affecting rural schools include relative geographic, cultural, and communications network isolation; fewer resources and less ability to achieve economies of scale; added challenges in staff recruitment and retention; added administrative burdens relative to staff size; and poverty and demographic shifts. These are the unique contextual factors each state has to grapple with if they are to put their rural schools on a trajectory toward college, career, and civic success (see figure 2).

Figure 2. College Enrollment Rates in the First Fall after High School Graduation, 2012 (percent)



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Report, National College Progression Rates, 2013

Box 1. Defining Rural

The US Census Bureau defines rural by what it is not: It is neither a city with a population of 50,000 or more nor a cluster of towns and cities with 2,500 to 50,000 people each. The National Center for Educational Statistics builds on the Census definition, adding three geographic categories within the rural definition:

- Fringe. Less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
- Distant. More than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than to 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- Remote. More than 25 miles from an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urbanized cluster.

Geographic, Cultural, and Virtual Isolation

One key contextual issue facing rural education is isolation, where greater physical distance separates rural students from higher educational institutions, healthcare providers, and jobs.[8] The US Census Bureau definition of rural focuses on the number of people in a given area, and the National Center for Educational Statistics expands on this, adding three categories to the definition of rural: fringe, distant, and remote (box 1). Rurality encompasses more than distance from urban centers and population size. It is also characterized by different types of work: service-oriented, farming, or other work in relationship with the land. Recreation areas or historical traditions may define a rural community.

Isolation does come with benefits. For instance, students in rural schools often attend smaller schools where teachers can give them more personalized attention.[9] Because schools are often central to the identity of these communities, longer-term residents may have stronger attachments to them and stronger investment in student achievement.[10] This cultural foundation provides a type of social safety net for many students. Community values can strongly motivate students to succeed and to stay in the community.

Geographic isolation also has negative consequences. The smaller pool of students leaves them without enough high-achieving peers to motivate them to excel. Students are less likely to discover career possibilities that exist only outside their rural communities, which can affect their motivation and success.[11] Isolation also makes it difficult for schools to recruit and retain qualified staff who can provide the full range of educational opportunities.[12] Real distance is frequently mirrored by virtual distance: Nationally, urban areas are three times more likely to have access to next generation broadband than rural areas.[13] Lacking a concentrated population to draw economic investment, rural areas often lose out on access to a number of services their urban peers take for granted.[14]

Resources and Economies of Scale

Economies of scale are paramount in rural communities across the country. Geographic isolation affects the amount and depth of available resources. Facing significant budget shortfalls, small schools and districts have consolidated into larger schools and districts.[15] Critics of this trend argue that this consolidation threatens community cohesiveness, that consolidated districts assume higher transportation costs, and that smaller schools outperform their larger counterparts. Proponents counter that consolidation enables needed cost savings and allows rural schools and districts to invest in specialized staff and a wider range of courses that meet the needs of more diverse learners.[16]

Recruiting and Retaining Staff

Because of their size, relative isolation, and inability to pay salaries comparable to larger metropolitan schools and districts, rural schools have experienced persistent educator shortages, particularly in specialized fields such as foreign languages, special education, and other key disciplines.[17] Additionally, due to lack of technology and resources, rural districts find it harder to implement new assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards, which require more bandwidth than a number of districts have.[18]

Administrative Burdens

On an administrative level, navigating new reporting requirements and adjustments to new state and federal standards, assessments, and accountability mandates have also strained capacity. Given the lack of available staff, facilities, and numbers of students per school, some rural education advocates have questioned the utility of recent initiatives around creating charter schools, closing down low-performing schools, and firing struggling educators.[19] They claim that these initiatives are more relevant to urban schools, while the administrative burden of implementing them often overwhelms already short-staffed schools and districts in rural regions. In this climate, policymakers need to ensure that instruments designed to address achievement gaps, high-quality standards, and preparing all students for college, career, and civic success are not so blunt as to exacerbate the very challenges they are working to overcome. If rural schools are to thrive, they need flexibility to leverage Title I, Title II, and other federal funding sources in ways that best meet their students' needs.

Poverty and Demographic Shifts

Increasing diversity and needs in rural areas have heightened the need for administrative flexibility. Like their urban and suburban peers, schools in rural areas serve students that are increasingly ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged. Yet their urban and suburban peers are more likely to have ESL instructors on staff or social service providers. Thus the lack of initial capacity to meet these needs make even small demographic changes a larger problem in rural districts. This increase in needs in turn contributes ongoing problems with teacher turnover and increases the already large burden on remaining administrative and educational staff.

Capitalizing on Rural Assets

For every challenge that limits rural schools' ability to serve their students effectively, there is an asset that makes it easier. Residents in rural areas have stronger,

Box 2. Leveraging Local Assets

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative, Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center, and the Crawford AuSable School District are examples of efforts that capitalize on local and regional assets to transform rural education.

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative is a collaboration of 21 rural Ohio districts that learn from each other's efforts, solve common challenges, and share resources to deliver stronger professional development and other services. Districts that are part of the collaborative increased the number of students taking the ACT college entrance exam by 11 percent since 2009 and increased the number taking dual enrollment courses by 186 percent since 2010.

Walton 21st Century Rural Life Center is a charter school in Walton, Kansas, that focuses on a project-based community engagement approach to educating its students. Previously a traditional public school with declining enrollment, the charter school opened its doors in 2007 to K-4 students with a vision of finding teachable moments in the children's surroundings. Local themes such as agriculture, animals, and windmills provide a spring board for project-based lessons that draw on advanced concepts in science, literature, mathematics, and other subjects. Despite its high percentage of low-income and special needs students, 56.5 percent of students on a recent state reading test scored exemplary compared with 33.3 percent in the district and 30 percent in the state.

Crawford AuSable School District in Grayling, Michigan, operates three schools that serve about 1,600 preK-12 students. In this financially disadvantaged rural community, student achievement is rising. Crawford AuSable actively measures individual student growth and district teamwork, which helps the district adjust curriculum and implement programs, including reading and writing workshops. The district was named as the top traditional school district in Michigan and ranked third overall behind two magnet charter schools. Additionally, Crawford AuSable was ranked first in the state among rural schools.

longer term relationships. In many rural areas, a sense of loyalty and attachment to communities underpins educational interventions that can benefit students. For example, community orientation can help foster "grow your own" strategies for leadership in rural schools and can attract candidates who seek smaller, more connected communities. Similarly, residents may see the school as a community center—a place where they can invest their energies and financial resources in the communities' youth, including disadvantaged youth (see e.g., box 2).

Strong rural education policy has several key characteristics. It should be asset-based, taking full advantage of rural resources. States can capitalize on rural schools' culture, values, personalization, and other assets to enable rural students to achieve at the highest levels. States can leverage dedicated teachers, principals, counselors, and other staff who—if not already prepared to do so—can be trained to meet the 21st century needs of students. States can also take advantage of opportunities for partnership in

rural areas to meet gaps in staffing, resources, and student experiences highlighted earlier.

State boards of education and other policymakers should remain vigilant and proactive in reducing barriers to education that disproportionately affect rural areas, even as they shift to an asset-based approach. These barriers include lack of broadband access and rigid funding structures that often unintentionally punish isolated rural regions. By attending to both challenges and assets in rural regions, policymakers can facilitate educational environments that enable all students to graduate high school ready for college, careers, and civic life.

The study group recommends four ways to help rural schools capitalize on their assets and reduce barriers to college, career, and civic readiness for rural students: expand access to technology and the ability to leverage it for student learning, capitalize on partnerships and collaboration, facilitate greater flexibility in rural education funding, and develop rural educator capacity to effectively meet students' learning needs. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states new opportunities to reduce barriers and expand opportunities in each of these four areas (box 3).

Expand Access to Technology

Although the federal government has invested in broadband communications across the country, rural schools and communities still have insufficient coverage when compared with their non-rural counterparts.[20] Broadband connects teachers to students, parents, and educational resources and opportunities, and it expands course options, such as AP, online, and remedial courses. Without adequate infrastructure for high-speed Internet, rural schools and the students they serve will be left behind. Ensuring this connectivity will require states to engage in a three-step process of identifying geographical areas of need, marshaling resources to address those needs, and leveraging capacity to ensure technology is a means to high-quality teaching and learning.

First, state policymakers should map the regions that don't have access. Information from the National Broadband Map suggests a negative relationship between how isolated a community is and the strength of that community's Internet connection (figure 3).[21] In part, this is due to a lack of options: Rural communities are more likely to be served by only one provider, limiting access to high-speed Internet. As states map their connectivity issues, they should attend to both the strength and availability of Internet access in schools and at home. More than a quarter of rural residents lack access to broadband speed connections compared with only 3 percent of non-rural residents.[22] By identifying and mapping areas of highest need, states can more strategically invest limited dollars.

Of course, identification of needs is only half the battle: State policy leaders must also collaborate to deliver solutions. State boards of education cannot do it alone. As with other challenging issues, bridging the digital divide requires close coordination among boards, state education agencies, the governor's office, and key state legislative offices. Together, they can marshal local, state, and federal resources to bring broadband to isolated regions. West Virginia, for example, is bringing state

Box 3. Advancing Rural Education under ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, P.L. 114-95) provides states new opportunities to advance the study group's policy goals.

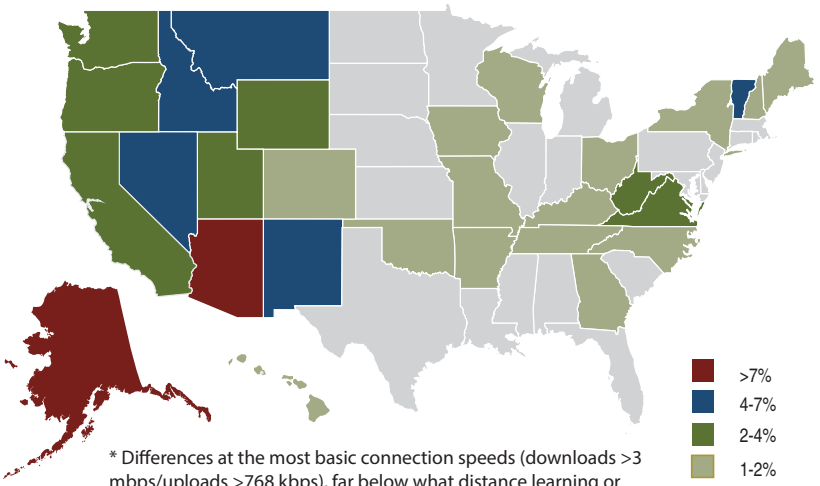
Expand Access to Technology. Title IV of the law (sections 4104 and 4109) includes provisions to support technology use in rural and remote areas and expand access to high-quality digital learning. State boards of education and state education agencies can ensure technology is part of a comprehensive plan to expand and enhance rural students' learning opportunities.

Capitalize on Partnerships and Collaboration. Parents and community partners can be the greatest asset for improving student outcomes in rural communities. ESSA authorizes Promise Neighborhoods and Full Service Community Schools, programs that invite this deeper participation. The law stipulates that rural schools should get their fair share of these funds, allowing states to invest more in rural and remote areas.

Facilitate Greater Flexibility in Funding. Compared with their urban and suburban peers, rural schools operate with fewer staff and reduced capacity to administer federal programs. Recognizing this handicap, ESSA provides greater flexibility in administering larger programs such as School Improvement Grants, whose one-sized-fits-all provisions had proved challenging in rural schools. At the same time, it maintains and expands programs rural schools rely on: the Small, Rural School Achievement Program and the Rural and Low-Income School program. The law also includes provisions for a Rural School Consolidated Grant application, enabling rural schools to submit consolidated applications for different programs through their LEAs, thereby enabling staff to spend more time on instruction and less on bureaucratic requirements. ESSA also requires the US secretary of education to conduct a thorough review of how the US Department of Education's organization, structure, and procedures affect rural schools.

Develop Educator Capacity. Like their urban and suburban peers, teachers and school leaders in rural areas need support in preparing their students for college, careers, and civic life. ESSA emphasizes leveraging funds for teachers and school leaders to develop this capacity. For example, under Title II, states are encouraged to help school leaders to develop instructional leadership skills. Other provisions enable funds to be used for career ladder, induction, and mentoring programs that can aid rural schools in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Title II directs the US secretary of education, to the extent practicable, to ensure an equitable geographic distribution of Title II formula grants, including the distribution of such grants between rural and urban areas. The law expressly permits rural districts to voluntarily combine their Title II allocations for collective activities.

Figure 3. Urban versus Rural Difference in Speed Availability, 2014 (percent of population)*



* Differences at the most basic connection speeds (downloads >3 mbps/uploads >768 kbps), far below what distance learning or videoconferencing would require.

Source: National Telecommunications and Information Administration, National Broadband Map.

policymakers together to coordinate investment in technology through its Project 24 initiative.[23]

One of the strengths of West Virginia and similar states' strategies is that they aren't predicated only on expanding access to technology; they also empower educators and students to leverage technology to enrich learning. These states are working to avoid the pitfall of investing in technology for its own sake—an approach that is both costly and counterproductive—in favor of best practices around technology integration.[24] Technology can be used to extend critical thinking, collaboration, and personalization. States should guide district and school practitioners in making wise technology investments that will lead to cognitively rich learning opportunities.

Utah has been another leader in this area (box 4). In its statewide digital teaching and learning master plan, the state board of education outlines strategies to harness technology as part of a learning environment that is more reflective of the challenges and opportunities students will encounter beyond their K-12 schools.[25] Through cohesive, strategic thinking around technology, states like Utah reduce geographic and resource barriers and ensure that technology is a means to high-quality teaching and learning.

Capitalize on Partnerships and Collaboration

Technology cannot by itself reduce the geographic isolation of rural communities. According to the Rural Education National Forum, state policymakers need a strategy for regional and community partnerships, with roles for parents, business part-

Box 4. Utah's Technology Plan

Utah's technology standards serve as an example of how a state can ensure its technology investment is efficient, strategic, and effective. Under the state board of education's technology plan, there are three essential goals the state must achieve: access to technology for educators, students, and parents; professional learning opportunities for these stakeholders to use technology to meet standards of learning; and ongoing technical support to maintain the systems. The board's standards also guide schools and districts in making strategic technological investments that leverage student learning and help students acquire key skills and competencies such as creative thinking, communication, and collaboration. The guidance provides corresponding support to prepare educators to use technology to transform learning.

ners, school staff, colleges, and community advocates (box 5).[26] Policymakers can encourage such partnerships by embedding them in broader economic development strategies and communicating about the successes of these efforts statewide.

Such collaboration can address deficits in resources and expertise in rural schools and districts. The greater social capital in rural areas, where people are more likely to know each other, makes these partnerships more likely.[27] Nevertheless, rural schools have barriers to overcome in establishing viable, self-sustaining partnerships: lack of knowledge on how to initiate and maintain partnerships, lack of time, and lack of flexibility. States can play a supportive role in overcoming these barriers by providing resources and toolkits to help rural schools connect to statewide industries and postsecondary institutions.

One way to ensure the long-term sustainability of partnerships is to couch them within broader community and economic development strategies that link education, health, employment, and economic development. This broader approach builds reciprocal relationships in which partners see the accomplishments of the school as part of their own short, medium, and long-term successes. A number of states focusing on rural economic development have already incorporated K-12 education as part of their broader strategy. In some of these endeavors (e.g., Illinois and North Carolina), state education agency staff and state board of education members are members of governing boards that drive this work. For state board of education members, this work requires greater collaboration with state legislatures, the governor, chambers of commerce, and other key state leaders and represents an opportunity to see their work as part of a strategy that extends beyond K-12 education.

State policymakers that incorporate education in economic development should ensure that they communicate successes across the state, making sure partners are credited for their efforts so more employers are attracted to the state's highly educated workforce and so that communities in other regions of the state can learn from these communities' accomplishments. One example of such an effort is Kentucky's Work Ready Communities, which is endorsed by the state board of education, chamber of commerce, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education,

Box 5. Developing Partnerships to Advance Rural Education

- **Map the territory.** Identify leaders and organizations in rural areas that can bring stakeholders together to fill gaps rural areas face.
- **Make connections.** Develop relationships with stakeholders, agree on local goals and outcomes, build on a community's strengths, and hold each other accountable for results.
- **Mobilize resources.** Ensure education is part of a broader economic development strategy.

Source: Rural Education National Forum

and other leading state actors. Under this initiative, a community that achieves certain criteria—e.g., improving high school graduation rates, postsecondary participation and completion rates, soft-skill attainment, and percentage of households with broadband access—is designated a Work Ready Community. This designation signals to employers across the state and country that the region has an educated workforce and is ripe for economic investment.[28]

Facilitate Greater Flexibility in Funding

Policy isn't often credited with expanding innovative opportunities, but it does get credit for diminishing them, as is often warranted when it comes to rigid funding structures, which affect rural schools most acutely. For example, a recent Institute for Education Sciences report on rural schools receiving federal school improvement grants found that the schools were ill-equipped to meet key program provisions: Long commutes complicated extending the school day, large catchment areas complicated parental engagement, and a small pool of qualified candidates complicated replacing existing staff.[29] Larger urban districts have more staff to carry out the requirements imposed by state and federal revenue sources, a luxury that small rural districts cannot afford.[30] States can lighten the load for rural educators and schools by reducing rural administrative costs, ensuring rural districts are aware of existing flexibilities, and helping rural districts identify new ways to get the most out of existing dollars. The added flexibility to states provided through ESSA (in use of Title V funds, for example) will continue to empower states to meet individual needs in their rural areas.

States can analyze the administrative burdens imposed by state and federal revenue streams with an eye toward bringing these burdens in line with the number of staff available and reducing unfunded mandates as much as possible. For example, a 2014 Colorado law, HB14-1204, allows small rural districts to file certain reports biennially rather than annually and exempts these school districts from other reports if they are accredited with distinction.[31] Such approaches can be tighter on ends and looser on means. That is to say, all students, including traditionally disadvantaged students in rural schools, can be required to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for college, career, and civic success while a state

remains agnostic on how schools reach this goal. Such a focus will empower rural districts to direct limited staff time toward instruction and away from work on compliance and grants administration.

States can be more proactive in identifying and supporting alternative school models that capitalize on the personalization of rural schools while maximizing resources. State officials can reflect on state and national data and best practices and then move funds away from approaches with little evidence of success and toward more proven approaches. In one such example, North Carolina is expanding rural access to early college high schools—schools that blend secondary and postsecondary education experiences. Through collaboration between state nonprofits such as North Carolina New Schools, the state board of education, the state's community colleges, 11 rural school districts, and others, North Carolina is focusing on personalizing student educational experiences and stoking student aspirations for continuing their education in postsecondary institutions. Students in these schools earn as many as 21 tuition-free college credits through local community colleges and online courses offered by the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and other state higher education institutions.[32]

Reducing administrative burdens and investing in only the most effective approaches will not solve all funding challenges in rural schools: In many cases, rural schools and districts will need to consolidate services or at least purchase jointly. Districts and schools in Colorado and New York have formed Boards of Cooperative Educational Service, or BOCES, which enable districts to seek joint services in areas such as workers' compensation, special education, healthcare, and professional development.[33]

When budgets call for broader consolidation, the decisions are often painful for rural communities, parents, and schools. States should ensure there is significant community and parental involvement and engagement in such decisions and that communities are engaging in this process with open eyes: When consolidation initiatives do not account for the age and capacity of existing buildings and require additional transportation costs, hiring of mid-level administrators, and other supplemental investments, they may not save nearly as much as the districts initially hoped.[34]A one-size-fits-all solution will not meet the needs of diverse rural regions. These districts' unique assets and challenges require tailored approaches.

Develop Educator Capacity

Rural schools must deal with a lack of sufficient human resources. Recruiting and retaining capable teachers and leaders is a national problem, but it can be more acute in rural settings. In addition, salaries are generally lower than in suburban and urban schools, which makes it difficult to attract qualified candidates.[35] Rural schools often lack school counselors or social workers, even as the growing diversity of their student populations heightens the need for support staff, as well as highly skilled instructors.[36] States must simultaneously ensure that educators, leaders, and staff in all schools have the competencies necessary for college, career, and civic success and help rural areas develop their own talent and reduce the incentives for existing qualified staff to leave (e.g., box 6).

Box 6. Strategies to Recruit and Retain Quality Educators

Several strategies for attracting and keeping quality educators emerge from research and case studies over the last decade:

- Nurture local talent and collaborate with regional postsecondary institutions to draw candidates from outside the communities to local schools.
- Improve recruitment experiences of applicants by reducing duplicative paperwork, applying best-practice marketing strategies to reach applicants, and maximizing applicants' exposure to school staff and the community more generally.
- Offer direct incentives to overcome barriers for applicants interested in teaching in rural areas: higher salaries and benefits, signing bonuses, loan forgiveness, scholarship initiatives, housing vouchers, and gas reimbursement.
- Provide comprehensive induction experiences to new candidates—mentoring, peer support, and community integration activities—so that candidates become acclimated to the school and community.
- Continue to provide structured, contextualized, collaborative professional learning opportunities so that educators and school leaders feel they are part of a continuous learning environment.

Sources: Jerry M. Lowe, "Rural Education: Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Small Schools," *Rural Educator* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 28–32; Zoe A. Barley and Nancy Brigham, "Preparing Teachers to Teach in Rural Schools," Issues & Answers Report, REL 2008–No. 045 (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Regional Educational Laboratory Central, 2008); Dorothy Hines and Kayla Mathis, "North Carolina LEA Case Study: Regional Specific Incentives for Teacher Recruitment and Retention," (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2007); Page McCullough and Jerry Johnson, "Quality Teachers: Issues, Challenges, and Solutions for North Carolina's Most Overlooked Rural Communities," (Arlington, VA: Rural School and Community Trust, 2007); Patti Chance and Susan Segura, "A Rural High School's Collaborative Approach to School Improvement," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 24, no. 5 (2009): 1–12.

If states expect teachers to engage students in more hands-on, cognitively rich learning, then this expectation must be reflected in how teachers are prepared, mentored, licensed, and supported. Because of the fewer numbers of teachers available in rural communities, these teachers must be able to obtain multiple-subject certifications and be prepared with the cross-disciplinary and collaborative practice skills that will enable them to manage the added demands they will face and the multiple hats they will wear.[37] These practices and competencies must be embedded in professional learning and support across the continuum. In order to attract and retain candidates to rural positions, educator preparation programs should provide practice opportunities in rural communities and help remove some of the financial

disincentives to teaching in rural communities. These proactive actions ensure the state has a more dependable pipeline of trained candidates for some of their most difficult to serve rural areas.

Many of the incentives designed to draw and retain teachers to rural schools will also need to be applied in the case of principals. It takes a special person to be a rural principal, a role often requiring multiple hats—teaching, counseling, and in some cases, bus driving—and such an individual is often forced to manage a building rather than lead instruction. More and more, states are enabling principals to see instructional leadership as their primary function. For example, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, like their predecessor Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards, include a number of skills of particular importance to rural administrators: setting a widely shared vision for learning, collaborating with community members, and understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural context of an area.[38] State boards of education in states such as Maryland have translated these standards into common expectations that have proved useful for both their rural and non-rural principals.[39]

The roles of nurses, counselors, and other support staff in building high-quality education cannot be discounted. Much as was the case with teachers and leaders, finding qualified staff to fill these roles in rural communities can prove difficult. The study group encourages states to seek creative ways to address this gap. This could include monetary and nonmonetary incentives highlighted earlier, "grow your own strategies" where existing staff are trained to help fill key roles, and broader strategies such as community school approaches that connect schools with community service providers to address mental and physical health and other developmental needs that affect student learning.[40]

States such as Nebraska have had a long, rich history with community schools. According to the Nebraska Rural Community School Association, the association serves 75,000 students in 189 school districts across the state[41] that rely on the asset-based approach referenced earlier: Successful rural schools don't operate in a deficit mind-set; they seize the resources and opportunities available in their communities to help prepare all students for college, career, and civic success.

Conclusion

America's rural schools are more than buildings. They embody the very culture of the communities in which they reside. A rural school is a place where not only youth go to learn, but where adults come together to discuss their community's future. A great part of what makes education in rural schools so valuable—including community loyalty and identity—is difficult to measure. People in rural areas know each other and are deeply invested in their communities. These assets should not be discounted: Rural education works best when communities see the school as an inviting place, a place where everyone's talent and time is welcome.

The job of state policymakers is to capitalize on these assets: providing enabling resources such as broadband technology, encouraging regional partnerships, adding administrative flexibility and support in funding, and helping educational staff develop additional skills to meet the needs of their students. There are character-

istics of rural schools that are unique to them, but their aspiration is not different from that of other schools. Students, parents, educators, and community members in rural areas all seek the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to succeed in college, careers, and civic life. Through considering and enacting policies recommended by our study group, we believe this aspiration will become reality for significantly more students.

Resources

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(703) 684-4000

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