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**ABSTRACT**

An effective staff development program for rural teachers will have identified the needs to be met, will incorporate good management principles, and will make use of a variety of resources--the community itself, nonprofessional staff, business and industry, and shared teaching efforts. Distinctive staff development needs of rural teachers may include obtaining specialized teaching resources; mastering use of "high-tech" innovations; integrating rural-focused content into curricula; securing funding and equipment; involving the community; relating with parents, peer professionals, and community members; and providing for special need students. Good staff development programs should incorporate a broad definition of staff development, ensure that relevant personnel at all levels are trained, develop partnerships to secure additional resources, and use low cost or free staff development tools. Effective rural staff development practices are use of system-wide models, use of specific technological approaches to meet special needs, and focus on individual teacher needs. A variety of rural staff development resources including journals, reports, reviews, and inservice modules are available through the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Rural Education Association, American Council on Rural Special Education, and National Rural Development Institute. Addressess and publications/services of these agencies are provided. (NEC)

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PLANNING STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS  
FOR RURAL TEACHERS

By

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# RURAL EDUCATION

## PLANNING STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR RURAL TEACHERS

An effective staff development program for rural teachers will have identified the needs to be met, will incorporate good management principles, and will make use of a variety of resources—the community itself, non-professional staff, business and industry, and shared teaching efforts.

### What are distinctive staff development needs of rural teachers?

Identifying the primary needs of teachers in remote areas is crucial in planning appropriate staff development programs. A good program will recognize that teachers need to know:

- How to obtain specialized teaching resources.
- How to use "high-tech" innovations such as accessing specialized secondary curriculum via satellite or using interactive videodisc systems for teacher training.
- How to integrate rural-focused content into their curricula, particularly when working with culturally disadvantaged students.
- How to obtain additional funding and equipment.
- How to involve the community as an instructional resource.
- How to relate effectively with rural parents, peer professionals, and community members.
- How to incorporate alternate instructional arrangements for special needs populations.

Of course, teachers will play an active role during the planning phase so that other needs can be identified and included in the program.

### What specific features might a good program include?

An effective staff development program will incorporate a variety of alternate resources including the community itself, nonprofessional staff, business and industry, and shared teaching efforts. Therefore, program effectiveness can be greatly enhanced if the following steps are included.

#### Incorporate a broad definition of staff development.

Planners should study the local rural culture as well as the communication and power systems to discern currently acceptable staff development methods and to discover the means for securing community support for new techniques. Typically, key communicators (according to both informal and formal systems) should be involved in planning unique staff development options. Such approaches as remote "high-tech" inservice systems and the four-day student attendance week are more successful when there is good community involvement during the planning stage.

#### Ensure that relevant personnel at all levels are trained.

A program which results in effective training of classroom teachers will probably still fail if ancillary support personnel are not also well versed in the objectives and desired end products. Relevant personnel such as secretaries, librarians, bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and others should receive appropriate inservice training. To the extent that it is reasonable, they should also be involved in planning the staff development approach.

#### Develop partnerships to secure additional resources.

Fiscal resources for staff development within rural school systems are typically inadequate, and cost-efficient alternatives must be considered. Partnerships between rural schools, businesses, and agencies will ensure greater resources for staff development. For example, businesses can gain tax deductions when donating computer time or equipment for inservice use. Many community agencies are willing to share computer time, to make cooperative purchases to assist schools in securing reduced prices, and to offer similar contributions. Such endeavors also promote long-term support for rural school programs.

#### Use low cost or free staff development tools.

Many simple systems of securing resources are frequently overlooked. Examples include (1) assessing individual teacher needs and resources and arranging for teachers to share or "barter" these with each other; (2) using retired or unemployed certified teachers as well-versed substitutes so that regular teachers can be released to observe, plan, or attend an inservice session, and (3) arranging informal brown bag lunches or after school sessions for group sharing and problem solving.

#### What are some examples of effective rural staff development practices?

##### System-wide models afford numerous advantages.

A data bank of staff development needs and resources can be established. An assessment instrument can be as basic as asking each staff member what assistance he or she could offer staff and what resources he or she is seeking. For example, a teacher might be willing to demonstrate computer assisted instruction and be seeking materials appropriate for involving a severely handicapped child in regular classroom activities. Local citizens who might contribute to inservice sessions or classroom activities (e.g., retired or unemployed certified teachers) are also queried regarding resources they can contribute. These available resources are linked to individual teacher development needs. This sometimes means that teachers temporarily exchange roles or that community volunteers manage the classroom so that the regular class teacher can observe another teacher or attend an inservice session. Relatively mobile personnel (e.g., principals or secretaries) can also assist in this effort. Permanent "floating substitutes" or teacher consultants can be made available.

The school week can be restructured so that students are present only four days. The fifth school day is devoted to time for teacher self education, consultation, and planning as well as group inservice activities. Communities that are involved in planning for such a program tend to support the concept and are more willing to arrange alternate activities for their children on the fifth day of the week.

##### Specific technological approaches meet special needs.

Computer-managed instruction can be used to teach educators new methods of administering and evaluating tests, keeping records, and making decisions.

Formal computer assisted instruction can be an especially valuable learning technique used by teachers in the most isolated settings. Appropriate software can be mailed to teachers, and a supplemental mobile inservice van equipped with computers can be used.

Amplified telephone systems allow teachers to hear lectures or hold discussion sessions with remotely located persons. Instructional television, including transmission via cable or special satellite, can present subjects that might otherwise be omitted from the small school system inservice program.

Educational satellites, audio conferencing, and videotape exchange systems can be used as remote inservice techniques.

Such systems alleviate the necessity for teachers to travel to a central school system or university location for instruction. For example, a statewide audio teleconferencing network can interconnect educational providers and receivers in isolated areas. The system can use live interactive audio with occasional computer networking to provide programming to small, rural, isolated educational institutions across the state.

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Satellite inservice sessions allow participants to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of consultants or professors in distant locations.

With microcomputers, small schools can now afford to access main frame programs for specific inservice menus and to access specialized topics such as vocational education and special education.

National and state telecommunication resource and information systems provide data bases of media, materials, and other program resources. Such linkage systems increase knowledge regarding inservice and student service options.

Remote electronic bulletin boards (i.e., the use of telecommunication systems that may be accessed by rural remote schools) offer options for interactive communication between teachers seeking information and those with expertise in a related area. Such boards can be operated from a district, cooperative, education service district, state department of education, or university base.

Mobile vans with specialized electronic equipment are used more frequently to reach educators in remote locations where school systems lack master teachers or access to essential curricular resources or extraordinary equipment. Such vans frequently carry mobile electronic curricula.

## Many practices focus on individual teacher needs.

In recent years, an increasing number of schools have been using a master teacher approach, and more state departments of education are requiring that school districts formulate plans guaranteeing that individual teacher needs are met. Such programs typically focus on staff development (instead of "one-shot" inservice) needs of individual educators. Exemplary practices usually require that each teacher design an individualized plan for appropriate administrators or master teachers.

Hotlines or crises information networks can be established so that educators can call a toll free number for advice regarding resources and methodologies to use with severely disabled students.

The "down time" of travel for itinerant specialized personnel (e.g., special educators and resource personnel for vocational or gifted education) can be used creatively for professional development. Cassette tape players in cars can be used to report to share, or to listen to inservice cassettes prepared by other school staff or by commercial enterprises.

Informal professional development sessions can be structured around brown-bag luncheons, social meetings, and other informal get-togethers.

Teacher consultants can be regional or building based personnel who are available "on call" to conduct structured observations, to provide demonstrations of effective instructional techniques, and to help identify resources responsive to teacher needs.

Video or audio cassette tapes of the teaching methods of a remotely located teacher can be made and mailed to a central location where it is reviewed and returned to the teacher with specific suggestions. The teacher can send a subsequent tape illustrating progress relevant to the critique.

Short-term teacher exchanges are beneficial as an inservice technique that provides participants with insights regarding the functioning of the total school system, the need for continuity in a student's education, and an understanding of other educators' roles. Longer exchanges involving an actual temporary shift from one cultural or geographic area to another are particularly useful for increasing a teacher's perspective and preventing "burnout."

The high rate of "burnout" in rural education and the need for professional growth that can be achieved by temporarily changing positions were among the reasons for initiating the personnel exchange system that is part of the National Rural Jobs Services operated by the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES).

## What are some of the resources available for rural staff development?

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS) offers rural education publications and personalized computer searches. Rural teachers may access these services by contacting ERIC/CRESS, Box 3AP, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003. Other publications, including journals, reports, and reviews that focus on rural educators, are available through the Rural Education Association (REA), the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES), and the National Rural Development Institute located at Western Washington University.

Inservice modules specifically designed for rural schools are available from ACRES. They are designed to be used in a self-sufficient manner (e.g., by a remote teacher isolated from traditional inservice opportunities) or in group settings. The topics addressed by modules include the following:

- The need to increase funding for equipment and materials
- The need to develop support for special education programs
- Difficulties of providing services on a regional (collaborative) basis
- Difficulties of involving rural parents in the education program
- Inadequate numbers of special education personnel
- Difficulties of delivering services to students with low-incidence disabilities
- Difficulties of transporting students to services or service deliverers to students
- Effective teacher consultation processes

A growing number of teacher preparation programs are increasing their accountability to rural schools by attempting to meet their staff development needs. For example, The Missouri Center for Small Schools, located at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, MO 64093, designs individualized inservice plans after consultation with rural administrators requesting assistance. Faculty are integrally involved in delivering inservice, preservice students observe rural education programs, and relevant summer courses are offered for credit.

National conferences specifically focusing on the needs of rural educators include those of the REA, 300 Education Building, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, and those of ACRES, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225.

ACRES also manages a National Task Force on Rural Staff Development which assists in identifying national needs and planning appropriate intervention methods. ACRES National Rural Jobs Services include a personnel exchange system.

A Rural Electronic Bulletin Board administered by ACRES is part of the national TeleNet telecommunication system. It provides information about conferences on rural education, successful instructional practices in specific rural subcultures, the ACRES Rural Educator Resource Network, and recent publications on rural education. The electronic mail capability facilitates direct communication among users.

A complete report entitled *Planning Staff Development Programs for Rural Teachers* can be obtained from the National Rural Development Institute, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225.

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