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ABSTRACT

The design of a needs assessment model to establish the existing status and requirements of general and special education in eight small rural South Dakota districts interested in forming an education cooperative involved: (1) synthesizing major areas of need into workable components; (2) designing a needs assessment instrument based upon these components; (3) identifying a balanced sample of educators, parents, and board members to respond to the instrument; and (4) analyzing the responses and summarizing the findings. The areas of need identified for the questionnaire included establishment of organizational and administrative responsibilities, compliance with state law, and enhancement/sharing of current general/community education and special education offerings/practices. Emphasis was placed upon potential expansion areas which would improve services beyond minimum mandated state requirements for curriculum, financing, staffing, scheduling, and transportation. Four separate color coded formats of the resulting questionnaire were administered to a total of 114 persons, representing superintendents (8), special education teachers (13), principals (16), counselors (8), elementary/secondary teachers (58), students (1), parents (2), school board members (7), and school psychologists (1). The process provided a viable, systematic means to analyze school district perceptions so as to provide administrators with data to establish/expand educational services cooperatives. (NEC)

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Cooperatives in Rural School Districts

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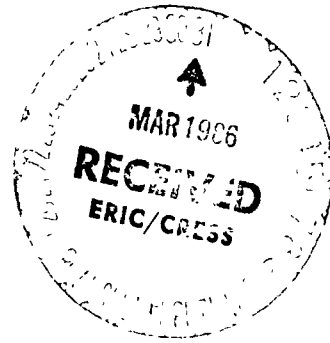
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Abstract

A Systematic Process for Developing Special Service Cooperatives in Rural School Districts

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Problems created when small rural districts attempt to meet the general educational needs of students involve curriculum, financing, staffing, scheduling and transportation, and these problems are compounded when dealing with programs for the handicapped and gifted. The development of educational service cooperatives is a must if small, rural school systems are to provide the essential services needed for quality education. The authors designed a needs assessment model to establish the existing status and requirements of general and special education in eight small rural districts which were interested in forming an educational cooperative. Additional emphasis was placed upon potential expansion areas which would improve services beyond minimum requirements as established by state law. In accomplishing this, the authors (a) synthesized the major areas of need into workable components, (b) designed a needs assessment instrument based upon these components, (c) identified a balanced sample of educators, parents, and board members to respond to the instrument, and (d) analyzed the responses and summarized the findings. The process that was the focus of the study served to provide a viable, systematic means to analyze the perception of a sample of all members of a school district, with the results analyzed in a succinct manner that provided the administrators with the necessary data for the establishment and expansion of educational service cooperatives.

Introduction

The recent upsurge of Federal and State demands concerning quality education, as witnessed through the various reports on educational excellence, has created a dilemma for rural states with small, isolated school districts. Current action in South Dakota by the State Board of Regents of Higher Education and the State Board of Education, relative to increased requirements in Mathematics, computers, Foreign Language, Science, Language Arts and Social Studies, has magnified this problem for many of the smaller school districts in the state. The ability of such districts to provide quality general and special education services on their own is fast becoming an insurmountable task.

Problems created when small rural school districts attempt to meet the general educational needs of the students include such areas as financing, staffing, and scheduling (Veselka, 1980). These problems become even more pronounced when attempting to service the needs of the handicapped (Hensley, 1966).

Problems of small rural districts include geographic size and inadequacy of the general education offerings as well as nonexistent special education programs, unserved and unidentified handicapped children, lack of

qualified staff, and uneven distribution of federal funds (Woodburn and Young, 1980). These, as well as problems in transportation (Plante, 1979), staff development (Helge, 1980), and instructional and noninstructional materials (Uxer, 1982), have led superintendents to the exploration of cooperative ventures.

South Dakota has experienced the voluntary development and operation of cooperatives beginning in the early 1970's. During the 1985 legislative session, the legislature passed the Education Reform Bill which establishes voluntary cooperatives within the state. In a state with 77,047 square miles and 195 school districts, 70% of which have a student population of fewer than 500, the need for cooperatives seems especially crucial. Veselka (1980) and Klees (1980) both indicate the enormous potential for cooperatives in strengthening rural education.

A review of the literature found successful cooperatives ventures in both regular and special education.

General Education Cooperatives

Amodeo, et. al. (1983) reported on the successful project carried on between four major educational and

technical institutions and schools in New Mexico. Morgan, et. al. (1975) reported on the successful use of large scale telecommunication systems to bring information to rural school districts. A Supplemental Educational Center in Bottineau, North Dakota has successfully provided programs to rural schools in the areas of administrative assistance for staff in-service, library sharing services, and the sharing of other materials (Jensen, 1973). The Texas Region XIX Educational Service Center (Uxer, 1982) has provided a variety of services including sharing of instructional media, cooperative purchasing and staff training to rural Texas school.

Special Education Cooperatives

While general education offers unique challenges for rural educators, providing services to special needs children seems to magnify these challenges (Hensley, 1966).

Helge (1984) in a review of five studies by the National Rural Project identified benefits and problems with cooperative programs for special education. Some of the benefits included cost efficiency, retaining local autonomy, compliance, access to specialists and better teacher retention. The problems centered around bureaucratic issues such as district goal displacement,

poor relationships between district and cooperative staff, supervision problems, and fiscal inequities. Many of these problems have also been seen by one of the current authors in cooperatives in South Dakota. However, successful cooperatives do exist. Lorimer (1981) reported on one such success in southern Colorado. Project REACH served 136 severely handicapped children in a three-year program. The main thrust of the project was successful. A successful model for utilizing a cooperative approach to home-bound programs for handicapped preschool children was presented by Figil, et. al. (1980). This program focused on administration, intervention, parent training and staff development.

In reviewing the literature the authors became more convinced that the possible solutions to many of the general and special educational problems facing rural schools in South Dakota lies in the cooperative model. As a result of the review, the present investigators developed a model for a needs assessment/feasibility study in the establishment of Special Services Cooperatives. The remainder of this report will outline the process taken in the development and implementation of the model.

Methodology

Process

The present authors were charged with the task of designing a needs assessment model to establish the existing status and requirements of general and special education in eight small rural districts which were interested in forming an educational cooperative. Additional emphasis was to be placed upon potential expansion areas which would improve services beyond minimum requirements as established by state law.

It was, therefore, necessary to: (a) synthesize the major areas of need into workable components, (b) design a needs assessment instrument based upon these components, (c) identify a balanced sample of educators, parents and board members to respond to the instrument, and (d) analyze the responses and summarize the findings.

The original charge as outlined by the eight (8) superintendents was:

1. How would legal status (state law), organizational, and administrative responsibilities be established?
2. How could current offerings/practices in the area of special needs students be shared and/or be enhanced?

3. How could current offerings/practices in the area of general and community education be shared and/or be enhanced?

Instrument

Based upon input from the literature, the eight superintendents, and state requirements for special and general education, a comprehensive questionnaire (see Table 1 for specific dimensions) was designed. As can be noted, the clusters that are the major dimensions included: (a) Special Education, (b) General Education, (c) Consultants and Specialists, and (d) Governance. The original instrument was designed by the investigators with input from the eight superintendents.

Respondents

In the interest of obtaining a balanced response to the instrument, respondents were selected from all areas of the school community. In all, a total of 114 persons were interviewed. The distribution of the participants was as follows:

Table 1

Personnel Interviewed

Dimensions	Supt.	Sp.Ed. Teach.	Prin.	Cslr.	Teach.	Parents	Stud.	Sch.Br. Pres.
Special Education:								
Basic Services	X	X						
Child Find	X	X						
Preschool	X	X						
Assessment	X	X						
Due Process	X	X						
Programming	X	X						
Personnel	X	X						
General Education:								
Teacher Sharing	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Media Sharing	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Staff Development	X		X	X	X			X
Community Education	X		X	X	X	X		X
Gifted Education	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

(table continues)

Table 1 (contd.)

Personnel Interviewed

<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Supt.</u>	<u>Sp.Ed. Teach.</u>	<u>Prin.</u>	<u>Cslr.</u>	<u>Teach.</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Stud.</u>	<u>Sch.Brd Pres.</u>
<u>Consultants/Specialists:</u>								
Social Workers	X	X						
Health Services	X	X						X
Legal Services	X	X						X
<u>Governance:</u>								
Desirability	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Financial	X							X
Board Structure	X							X

Superintendents	=	8
Board members	=	7
Principals	=	16
Special Education Teachers	=	13
Elementary and Secondary Teachers	=	58
Counselors	=	8
Parents	=	2
Students	=	1
School Psychologist	=	1

It is important to note that the comprehensive questionnaire was not given in total to all of the respondents. A breakdown of major and specific dimensions was performed and included in four separate formats as follows:

1. Full Format: Superintendents
2. Modified Format I: Special Education Teachers
3. Modified Format II: Principals, Counselors, Teachers, Students and Parents
4. Modified Format III: School Board Presidents

The four forms were color coded for ease in administration and analysis.

Discussion

The development of cooperatives is a must if small, rural school systems are to provide the essential services needed for quality education. Too many times cooperatives are established through a "seat-of-the-pants" process that leads to misunderstanding, inadequate programming, poor staffing levels and misplaced funding. The development of a cooperative needs to involve feasibility studies such as the one described here.

The process that was the focus of the study reported here seemed to provide a viable, systematic means to analyze the perceptions of all members of a school district. The results were analyzed in a manageable, succinct manner that provided the administration with a mapped-out route for cooperative expansion that takes into consideration the attitudes of members of the school districts involved in the cooperative. At the same time, allowing input in the development of the instrument as well as the survey process, on the part of the administrators, provided a validation of the instrument that cannot be accomplished through other means.

While the results of each study will vary, the

authors strongly recommend the process outlined in this report for future feasibility study of cooperatives.

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