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ABSTRACT

This paper examines primary issues influencing rural educational cooperatives. The paper highlights the benefits of rural cooperative formation and outlines the key points in creating effective rural interdistrict cooperatives. It is directed toward those who are interested in policy issues surrounding cooperative development and maintenance. The central focus is on local policy choices which affect rural school district cooperative development. The first section contains a working definition of cooperatives, describing different types of cooperatives and their benefits. Different types of cooperatives include: (1) formal, independent cooperatives; (2) cooperatives with governing boards; and (3) cooperatives with limited scope. Keypoints of cooperative development include establishing clear goals, good organizational structure, identifying strong leaders, and using available support organizations. The second section features a brief planning guide for cooperative development and refers to potential trouble spots which should be addressed so rural school district cooperatives can prosper. Steps include evaluating district strategies, selecting a form of cooperative, and organizing it. A sample of suggested cooperative goals is offered. The document includes a bibliography of approximately 75 entries. (TES)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATIVES

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RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATIVES

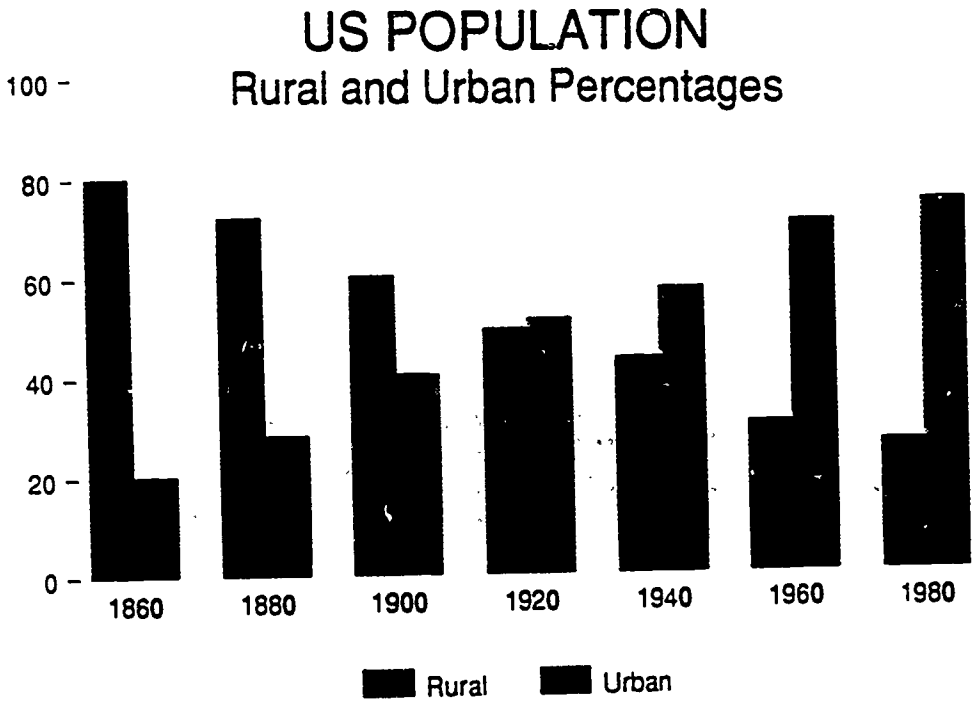
Since the beginning of history, people have banded together for common benefit, sacrificing their autonomy for a greater good. Without mutual support and cooperation, mankind would be unable to survive. At the same time, however, individual members within the cooperating groups have striven to maintain their identity, dignity, and, as much as possible, their independence.

Rural districts, especially isolated ones with small and resource-poor schools, often find themselves in the identical dilemma, hoping to balance their desire for independence with their need for assistance in delivering a quality educational program. In meeting this challenge head on, rural schools have been in the forefront of successful cooperative efforts: linking their districts with other districts, with outside agencies, and with private industry.

Since the Civil War, rural areas in America have gradually lost, and in many cases, rapidly lost, population to urban areas. In 1880, 75 percent of Americans lived in rural settings which were almost invariably agrarian. A century later that proportion had reversed, with 25 percent of the population residing in rural communities (of which very few were still solely agrarian). New Alliances for Rural America (1988), a task force report commissioned by the National Governors Association, highlights the recent challenges facing rural America. According to the report, three-quarters of a million people left rural

communities in 1986-87 alone. Between 1979 and 1986, rural America experienced job growth at less than half the rate enjoyed by the rest of the country. During the same period, unemployment rates in non-metropolitan areas rose from 0.4 percent higher to 2.6 percent higher than that of their urban and suburban counterparts. Volatility in acreage pricing intensified rural economic difficulties, as did the drop in commodity prices in the first half of this decade.

Figure 1.



Source: *U.S. Census Bureau*

As the population base for rural schools dwindled over the past century, so did enrollment, fiscal resources and programs. With Conant's (1959) dictum that no high school should have fewer than 100 students, the pressure on small, rural schools to consolidate intensified. Thirty years later, however, the rush to merge small districts into larger ones is viewed in a different light. As Sher (1988, 1977) demonstrated, rural schools play an essential role in the American educational system, are worthy of preservation, and, in many cases, serve as a model for larger districts reorganizing into more manageable units. The formation, maintenance and strengthening of rural educational cooperatives is one method of ensuring the continued effectiveness and vitality of small, rural school districts.

Cooperation, collaboration and other mutually beneficial activities are not new concepts for rural communities. Rural cooperatives, in fact, are commonplace. Fire protection, barn-raising and rural electrification are all examples of the spirit of mutual benefit encountered in rural America. A collaborative economic activity linking, say, a locally owned accounts receivable processing company located in a small town in Idaho with a large department store chain sited in downtown Portland, is akin to other cooperative ventures currently underway in rural America.

In general, though, the shift in the economy from an agricultural production/manufacturing base to an information processing/service base has transpired with minimal benefit to rural areas. Ironically, the movement in the economy toward information processing and analytical activities could prove of tremendous benefit to rural communities because modern communications technology allows such economic activity to flourish anywhere. If our cities and urban areas continue to decline, grow more congested, and are perceived as

dangerous, the safer, slower-paced rural communities will increase in attractiveness.

This paper, which examines the primary issues which influence rural educational cooperatives, is divided into two sections. The first section contains a working definition of cooperatives, highlights the benefits of rural cooperative formation and outlines the key points necessary for creating effective rural inter-district cooperatives. The second section features a brief planning guide for cooperative development and refers to potential trouble spots which should be addressed so rural school district cooperatives can prosper

Since rural educators are the primary audience for this paper, every attempt is made to concentrate on research findings from rural settings. In some cases, findings from urban cooperatives are pertinent and are included. Further, the paper assumes that the reader is either interested in or curious about the policy issues surrounding cooperative development and maintenance. The central focus of the paper, therefore, is on the local policy choices which will affect rural school district cooperative development and maintenance.

RURAL COOPERATIVES DEFINED

Almost any activity involving two or more people where agreement is reached to share resources, expertise, ideas or other items of value could be labeled cooperative. The same holds true for projects involving two or more school districts–the range and scope of collaborative undertakings which could fall within the broadest definition of cooperative activities are vast.

Two rural superintendents meeting once a month for coffee at a restaurant and discussing district problems and exchanging potential solutions is a cooperative activity. So is a half-dozen rural districts pooling fiscal resources to purchase insurance, equipment, or personnel. And, it could be safely argued, all of education is a cooperative activity, with students, parents, support staff, teachers, administrators, communities, state agencies and the federal government collaborating to ensure that the human potential present in today's youth is realized.

For the purposes of this paper, however, cooperative ventures among districts must be restricted to a somewhat narrower scope. Susan Urahn, from the Research Department of the Minnesota House of Representatives, in a report titled "The Organization of Education," developed a succinct definition for educational cooperatives:

> Interdistrict cooperation is the voluntary sharing of resources between two or more school districts.

Urahn's emphasis on the voluntary nature of cooperative activity is essential for small, rural districts. From a rural perspective, one of the most troubling aspects of any potential cooperative venture is that it might later lead to involuntary cooperation, i.e., consolidation. Cooperative ventures which are non-threatening and undertaken voluntarily are far more successful than those which are perceived as mandatory or coercive.

Urahn's definition of resources is equally comprehensive:

> Resources, broadly defined, can include students, teachers, administrators and other personnel, facilities, equipment, transportation, and purchasing.
>
> Interdistrict cooperation (therefore) is a generic term encompassing a wide variety of cooperative options for school districts.

Janice Weaver's article in the Journal of Teacher Education (Vol. 30), examining the challenges of collaborative activities between school districts and universities, provides a second, more formal definition of collaborative or cooperative activities. Weaver's interpretation of cooperation emphasizes the political nature of all human activities:

> Collaboration (cooperation) is not mere cooperation or a matter of good will, but an agreed-upon distribution of power, status and authority. Local districts, school boards, community groups, teachers, administrators, state department officers, college faculty and administrators all have vested interests in the control of the educative process. The nature of shared governance relationships will vary in kind and in difficulty according to the degree to which vested interests conflict or coincide. Negotiation of vested interests and conflicting needs is central to effective collaboration.

Weaver's focus on the political–or from another perspective, the human–aspects of cooperative activities is worthy of careful consideration. Ignoring human foibles which can hinder cooperative activities will prove self-defeating, for no cooperative endeavor will succeed for long without the negotiated resolution of predictable conflicts over, for example, governance, goals or resource allocations. Cooperatives which prosper have an informal or formal organizational structure of sufficient resiliency so the cooperative can ameliorate inevitable conflicts smoothly and efficiently.

Urahn's emphasis on the voluntary nature of cooperatives and Weaver's emphasis on negotiation provide the framework for the working definition of rural cooperatives used in this paper. If these two elements are present, or are incorporated during the initial stages of cooperative formation–voluntary participation and skillful negotiation of conflicts–then the cooperative gradually takes on a subculture of its own. Participants learn to value the cooperative itself (it gains status independent of its members) and believe continued participation worthwhile. The League of Schools--a cooperative network linking Idaho State University and fifteen school districts in the state–has gained sufficient stature that participants identify directly with the cooperative, and value their membership in it.

The working definition of cooperatives used in this paper, therefore, is:

COOPERATIVES ENTAIL THE VOLUNTARY SHARING OF RESOURCES BETWEEN TWO OR MORE SCHOOL DISTRICTS WHO HAVE AN INFORMAL OR FORMAL AGREEMENT PROVIDING FOR THE NEGOTIATED RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS.

The term *conflicts* covers a broad range of disagreements, i.e., it includes friendly discussions about the nature and goals of the cooperative, arguments over

the appropriate governance structure, or even quibbles over apparently mundane concerns such as a catchy title or acronym. The crucial element for successful collaborative efforts is that the participants come to believe that despite the nature or severity of divisive issues they will be amicably resolved with the best interests of the cooperative, rather than individual members, at heart.

A few brief observations on one additional factor–a simple classification scheme–completes the working definition of rural school district cooperatives.

Three Classes of Rural Cooperatives

In general, cooperatives can be classified according to their level of complexity and degree of formal organizational structure. Although rural cooperatives may be clustered into three general categories, the distinctions between the groups can easily blur. Rural cooperatives can be thought of as thriving across a wide spectrum of organizational structures and responsibilities, but it is useful to congregate them so the issues that each classification faces can be clarified.

[redacted]

Cooperatives which have their own independent authority, facilities, administration, and fiscal resources (usually collected from fees paid by participants or from tax levies) comprise the first category. Educational service districts which provide or coordinate a wide range of services are prime examples. Although these formal cooperatives are pivotal to the continued success of small, rural schools, they are not the principal emphasis of this paper. Often a formal, complex cooperative will spawn off simpler, less formal cooperatives which fall into either of the two categories discussed below

[redacted]

Cooperatives linking two or more districts which have a governing body composed of representatives of the participating districts make up the second category. These cooperatives vary widely with different goals, organizational configurations and responsibilities, and can run the gamut from sharing capital expenditures to staff development. The development and maintenance of this class of rural cooperative is the central emphasis of this paper.

[redacted]

Cooperatives which are formed to meet individual district needs comprise the bulk of the third category. The primary distinction between the second and the third categories is that districts in this final category cooperate solely to meet their own needs. Two districts which share a special education teacher, have no formal organizational structure to handle policy issues concerning the teacher, nor have any interest in expanding the role or nature of the cooperative venture fall into this final category. In addition, because the cooperative activities are often short-term, the participants do not identify with the "cooperative" itself as they would in the first two classifications. In most cases, an informal system is used to coordinate the interdistrict sharing, which is often completely dependent upon the personalities of the key representatives of the districts.

BENEFITS OF RURAL COOPERATIVES

Pine (1984), writing on educational collaboration, points out that in the modern world, cooperation is more than just an optional or useful strategy: it is the *only* strategy. Long gone are the days when an individual instructor or a school can be a resource for all the children in the classroom or school; equally antiquated is the notion that an individual teacher or school can keep pace with the changes in curriculum, technology or instructional methodology.

Besides the customary benefits of cooperation/collaboration–increased efficiency, preservation of programs, etc.–Pine also describes several less obvious gains from collaboration:

- new relationships and contacts
- a reinvigorated teaching staff
- swift dissemination of new knowledge
- improvement of practice
- opportunity for reciprocal relationships between schools and universities, schools and other schools, and schools and other agencies
- reduction of redundant efforts
- advancement of knowledge

Many of the innovations–and much of what is currently effective–in cooperative development and maintenance will arise through the experiences of rural educators. Rural schools, because of their resource constraints, will continue to serve as the crucible for the creation of effective cooperatives. Rural schools, for example, are on the cutting edge of distance education, which requires cooperation between the transmitting site, the receiving site, teacher unions, local school boards, state agencies and administrators. It may be useful, then, for small, rural schools to view their resource deficiencies as an opportunity to realize the many benefits of interdistrict collaboration rather than as a condition which will handicap their efforts.

1. Flexible response to local conditions

Local conditions for small, rural schools, especially ones which are isolated, can be crippling. Small communities which would like to preserve their schools but at the same time cannot afford a comprehensive program have the opportunity, through cooperative efforts with neighboring districts, to design a mutually supportive program which fits the local conditions of each.

Cooperation is more than just an optional or useful strategy, it is the only strategy.

Cooperatives offer the possibility of flexible responses, i.e., there may be several methods for overcoming resource deficiencies by linking with other districts. Sharing personnel costs is one strategy, but in a different setting sharing students may be more compelling. Or, for example, a district with underutilized facilities may prove an excellent fit with a district which lacks facilities. Cooperative or collaborative ventures furnish a wider range of possible responses to local needs than operating independently and help to overcome the sense of vulnerability which often confronts small, rural schools.

2. Reduced fiscal burden

Perhaps the most logical and readily cited motive for cooperative formation is cost reduction. The data, however, on the cost-effectiveness of cooperatives are less clear cut (Urahn, 1988 and others). Certain types of cooperatives are inherently cost-efficient–districts which join insurance pools, for example, are able to substantially reduce premiums–but other cooperative ventures which at first glance appear cost effective may not be so in practice. In general, of course, any successful effort to reduce costs should be championed, and there are numerous examples of successful cooperatives which do so through joint purchasing agreements, consolidated transportation districts, or the like.

If the central focus of the cooperative is economic...it is difficult to preserve.

Where cost savings are less evident is usually in academic program areas. Two schools which share in the preservation of a voc-ag program may find that their per pupil costs are actually higher when transportation and other costs are factored into the economic analysis of the shared program. But the truth is that while per pupil costs may increase, the overall costs to each of the participating districts is reduced (a single, small district cannot afford the equipment and the space, but two districts pooled together can) and both programs survive.

Research has shown (Urahn, 1988) that cooperatives which are formed *primarily* for cost saving are often troublesome to maintain. Fiscal resource sharing, unless controlled by an outside agency, is difficult to negotiate. If the central focus of the cooperative is economic–compared to maintaining or enhancing programs–it is difficult to preserve.

3. Improved program and services, increased opportunities for students

Perhaps the most frequent or easily defensible motive for collaboration among districts is the improvement or preservation of programs. Cost reduction

and shared resources are worthwhile undertakings, but the ability to enhance programs for students should be uppermost in the minds of all educators.

Any activity which increases academic or extra curricular opportunities for students is laudable. Districts which share athletic teams (Monk, 1986) allow students to participate who would otherwise be denied. Student access to leadership positions has long been cited as an advantage of small schools, and cooperatives can enhance the nature and importance of student leadership opportunities.

4. Survival

The strongest motivator for small, rural schools to join in cooperative efforts is their own wish for survival.

The strongest motivator for small, rural schools to join in cooperative efforts is their own wish for survival. Although there are literally tens of thousands of cooperatives flourishing across America, it is still a challenge for some small, isolated rural schools to accept the fact that they cannot afford to remain completely autonomous. Cooperatives can prevent the consolidation of small districts by allowing them to pool resources and strengthen programs.

5. Shared expertise, shared decision making

It is unrealistic to expect any district, no matter how extensive, to have the expertise to meet all student needs. Cooperatives, even informal ones, provide a network or forum for the exchange of ideas. Without the outreach of a cooperative which fosters personal contacts between, say, district superintendents, the regular exchange of ideas and new knowledge is far less likely.

Almost all administrative and societal trends–site-based management, quality circles, etc.–point to the increased importance of shared decision making. Shared decision making has several inherent advantages. First, no one individual

is expected to be an expert in all things. Second, expertise can be tapped from a variety of sources. And third, when a decision is made in a group setting, there is some protection offered to the rural administrator who can take comfort in the support of his or her colleagues.

In fact, it is generally recommended that any criticism of a cooperative's activities or decisions be restricted to closed-door meetings of the cooperative board. In the larger community represented by the cooperative members, comments should always be supportive, reaffirming the importance and shared expertise of the cooperative.

6. Professional growth

As research has shown (Binker 1984, Collins 1983, Gallegos 1983, and others), cooperatives help aid professional growth in two ways. First, a cooperative allows for the exchange of ideas and expertise. Second, staff development is one of the most common and most successful roles for cooperatives in rural areas. The League of Schools in Idaho, for example, has a long history of staff development activities which are cooperatively planned. Since it is an activity which is essentially non-threatening (programs or students aren't mixed, governance disputes are minimal) cooperative efforts featuring staff development activities, workshops, conferences, idea exchanges and the like are an excellent first step leading to more complex cooperative activities. In addition, isolated rural districts rarely have the individual resources to fully fund their own staff development activities. Several rural districts, however, can find the money to provide quality inservice for staff.

...isolated rural districts rarely have the individual resources to fully fund their own staff development activities.

7. Broadened sense of community

Cooperatives can overcome the sense of isolation which is present in many rural communities, especially those which have continued to lose population. Cooperatives gradually take on an independent identity, and this link to other communities encourages a rural town to extend its own sense of community beyond the city limits.

Second, students who have participated in rural-to-rural or rural-to-urban distance learning projects have had the added benefit of realizing that their skills and abilities are on a comparable level to that of their urban and suburban counterparts. The realization that a student is part of a larger community of other learners, who have the equivalent struggles and successes, is encouraging and helps to dismantle myths on both sides.

8. Educational equity

Equity issues have been on the forefront of educational debates for the past thirty years. Essentially, it is one of the values of American education that all students, despite their background, ethnicity, handicap or geographic location are entitled to an equitable education. Since a small, rural school can not be expected to be all things to all people, cooperatives broaden the base of educational opportunities for students. Special education efforts, in fact, are a noteworthy example of cooperative efforts which cut across rural districts. Montana, for example, has twenty five special education cooperatives providing services to dozens of isolated, rural districts.

Rural isolated schools have a long history of sharing specialized teaching or support services, such as counselors, special education instructors, school psychologists and curriculum specialists (reading teachers, speech therapists, instructors for the deaf, etc.). Since rural districts do not have the critical number

of students needed to pay for those professionals independently, interdistrict collaboration has been the rule (Helge, 1984).

9. Enhanced efficiency, reduced resource overlap

It has become increasingly evident across all professions that efficiencies can be ensured by avoiding redundant service delivery. Medicine provides a good analogy, for not all hospitals can afford to purchase the most recent medical technology. Instead, hospitals tend to specialize in particular treatment methodologies. So, too, can rural school districts. Schools which possess excellent science programs, for example, can link with schools which excel in other program areas.

10. Infusion of enthusiasm and "can-do" spirit

Since cooperatives are an opportunity to increase the opportunity for success, they can prove infectious across districts. A small, rural school which believes that it cannot accomplish a worthwhile project or maintain a quality program is reinvigorated when through cooperative efforts with other districts it is able to overcome the obstacles inherent in resource deficiencies.

KEYPOINTS TO COOPERATIVE FORMATION

Beder (1984), writing on successful cooperative efforts between continuing education agencies and other organizations, detailed four dominant themes which he identified as essential for effective cooperative development. These four themes will be present in any cooperative venture which intends to be long term:

Table 1.
Themes for Successful Collaboration

Reciprocity	Successful cooperatives feature relationships where partners exchange resources valued less for resources valued more.
System openness	Participants must be willing to allow "outsiders" to cross their boundaries. If a school system is closed to outside influence, cooperative activities will prove futile.
Trust, Commitment	Of these two characteristics, commitment is the more important. Unless all participants are committed to a common vision for a cooperative venture, it will not succeed. Trust-building requires time to develop.
Structure	The structural organization of the cooperative must match not only the needs of the cooperative itself but also the organizational philosophies of the participating districts. A cooperative with an organizational structure incongruous to that of its members will cause inordinate stress for the participants.

Adapted from Beder, "Principles for Successful Collaboration."

Beder believes that improperly constructed or poorly designed cooperative activities will not only become dysfunctional, but they will also prove harmful to the participants. The memory of a failed cooperative lingers long after the cooperative has dissolved and will hinder or prevent any future attempts at collaboration. The collapse of a poorly planned cooperative reinforces the unfortunate belief that small, isolated districts are inadequate and cannot compensate for their resource deficiencies.

In addition to Beder's four themes for cooperative formation, much has been written about the key elements which must be considered for cooperative ventures to succeed (Thomas 1987, Nachtigal 1985, Sederberg 1988, Monk 1986, and others). The items which follow are a compilation and partial synthesis of that research. Successful cooperatives will most likely have incorporated the factors which follow into their operating philosophy.

1. A common sense of purpose, clear goals

Successful collaborations have a well-defined purpose, i.e., each member has a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the organization. The purpose of a cooperative may change with time–districts which join together to reduce transportation costs may later share personnel, students or other resources–but the evolving role of the cooperative must remain commonly held.

The mission statement, outlining clearly the cooperative's purpose, should be simple and straightforward. Equally clear should be the cooperative's goal. Ambiguous or hazy goals will only undercut the vitality of the cooperative. And as the role of the cooperative evolves, so should the mission statement and goals.

A cooperative which begins to expand its role without careful consideration of the implications of that expansion risks dissolution. As a cooperative takes on additional responsibilities, it increases the likelihood that it

will exceed its functional capacity. In order to prevent overreaching, it is advisable that the goals of the cooperative be manageable and reasonable, and that a formal, written agreement exist which clearly delineates the role and purpose of the cooperative.

2. Membership set by reasonable geographic and enrollment compatibility

One of the most noteworthy advantages of cooperative formation is the overcoming of deficits imposed by geographic isolation. Overcoming extreme geographic isolation, however, is often difficult. Attempting to form cooperative organizations with districts which are so scattered that face-to-face meetings become unwieldy or prohibitively expensive can prove insurmountable. Special arrangements can be made to accommodate isolated districts, but when the total span of the cooperative is too extensive, say, more than a half-day's travel for a meeting for any one member, the likelihood of a cooperative's success decreases.

Overcoming extreme geographic isolation, however, is often difficult.

Although today's technology seems to be rapidly eliminating the necessity for personal contact (a rural cooperative convening simultaneously in several sites, with the participants linked by interactive TV via satellite, by conference telephone calls, by computer networks, and/or by the use of facsimile machines for instantaneous or real time communication is at least feasible), the evidence from the research literature on distance education still indicates that successful information exchange is best facilitated by at least some face-to-face contact. In addition, isolated rural schools are frequently the victims of the funding paradox: districts with the greatest needs have the fewest funds, and are, therefore, the least likely candidates for expensive hi-tech equipment.

3. Initial time commitment (length of time, evaluation point)

A cooperative effort, like any joint endeavor, benefits from a clear and reasonable timeline. The development of a timeline for a cooperative–or even for one already operational–should reflect the consideration of two factors: one, the expected length of time commitment; and two, a date when the success and purpose of the cooperative venture can be evaluated.

Length of time commitment

Cooperative efforts can, of course, be effective over any time period. Many have flourished for decades; others have existed only briefly. A shared teacher, for example, could be engaged cooperatively by two districts for a single semester, with the instructor returning to his or her home district at the completion of the term. The short duration of the collaboration–several months–does not detract from the benefit realized by the two districts.

Larger cooperative ventures encompassing several districts and a comprehensive set of tasks require more time.

Larger cooperative ventures encompassing several districts and a comprehensive set of tasks require more time. The increased number of participants and the complexity of the tasks demand additional planning. And although there is no ideal time period for a cooperative activity involving several districts, a minimum commitment of three years seems to be a reasonable benchmark for any new interdistrict cooperative venture. Three years usually prove sufficient for smoothing over the turmoil which any new venture inevitably encounters.

Another, less apparent, advantage to a fixed time commitment is that districts who may be reluctant to join will be encouraged to do so if they understand that their time commitment is finite. A district wishing to sever ties with a cooperative yet hoping to avoid a confrontation with other members appreciates the opportunity for a graceful exit provided by a fixed time commitment.

End or evaluation point

A cooperative venture should identify a future date at which time the participants will evaluate its accomplishments and/or shortcomings. This assessment point allows the participants the opportunity to decide if the cooperative is worth continuing, if it should be disbanded, or if its nature and purpose should be expanded or modified. Since it is essential for any cooperative group to re-examine its role on a regular basis, a fixed time for evaluation ensures this occurrence.

4. Establish organizational structure

The basic guideline, or rule of thumb for cooperative organizational structures is similar to John O'Sullivan's comment on government, "The best government is that which governs least." The formal organizational structures of a cooperative and the official roles, responsibilities and written policies, therefore, should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Each member of a cooperative must have a clear stake in its success.

Each member of a cooperative must have a clear stake in its success. A variety of organizational structures can ensure ownership by the participants, but consideration should be given to granting each member veto power. Veto power enhances the sense of ownership since it permits any member to wield authority sufficient to prevent the cooperative from moving forward. At first this seems as if one member of a cooperative can hold up progress–which is true–but if veto power is viewed as a complement to consensus building, it does not seem so oppressive. Consensus requires agreement among all members of any organization; veto power for an individual participant is simply a protection to ensure that consensus will be reached.

A reasonable balance between the need for veto power and the time-consuming challenge of requiring consensus can be achieved by separating issues which are of primary concern from issues which are purely administrative. Administrative issues can be handled by a simple majority vote or by delegating responsibility for particular tasks or functions to individual members. Issues which can threaten the existence of the cooperative–governance or finance, for example–must be resolved by reaching consensus, whereas administrative issues–meeting places and times, opening or preserving communication channels, etc.–can be delegated.

5. Identify strong district leaders, rotate leadership responsibilities

The representative for each district in a cooperative must be an individual with sufficient authority that he can speak confidently for the district. For most small, rural districts this would be the superintendent. If the superintendent is not the designated representative on the cooperative, then his or her designate must be a person wielding clear authority.

In general, it is advisable that any leadership or positions of authority (or perceived authority) should be rotated on a regular basis.

In general, it is advisable that any leadership or positions of authority (or perceived authority) should be rotated on a regular basis. Although it may appear shortsighted to remove a competent leader and replace her or him with an inexperienced one, the rotation of leadership positions has several advantages. First, it reduces the likelihood of one member or school dominating. Second, it encourages rule by policy rather than by personality. And third, the more members who gain experience in leadership roles, the more dynamic the organization.

Obviously cooperatives can and have succeeded with one person assuming the leadership role over an extended period. Longevity provides stability, which is often at a premium in rural settings. There is, however, a clear danger in a

cooperative venture becoming overly dependent upon the strength of one individual.

6. Clear and regular communication, accurate documentation

One of the most difficult challenges for any organization is maintaining clear and regular communications. Clear communication enhances feelings of ownership, reduces suspicion and helps ensure the timely completion of work. Insufficient communication, deliberately misleading or malicious communication or the lack of standardized communication procedures are highly corrosive.

Information is power, and cooperatives prosper when power is shared with all rather than reserved for a few. Cooperatives, no matter how informal, can maintain productive communications by recording and distributing the minutes from meetings, circulating a concise newsletter (or a newsy letter), and preserving a historical record of the cooperative's mission statement, policies, procedures, decisions and activities.

Carefully documenting the history and proceedings of a cooperative has several advantages: it accurately records progress, decreases circular discussions, provides a justification of the cooperative's decisions and maintains an accurate paper trail should the cooperative come under scrutiny.

7. Clarity on finance

Like a marriage, cooperatives can founder over economic conflicts (often governance disputes arise from fiscal issues). Financial questions within school districts are very explosive: interest groups in the school judge any shifting in financial resources as directly impacting their well-being. If, for example, money is set aside to purchase a satellite dish, the faculty may perceive that they are adversely affected because the expended funds could have been spent on salaries.

Financial questions involving several districts–especially where resources are already tight–can be even more troublesome. Equipment which is jointly purchased or financed by several districts becomes especially problematic when a district or district(s) decides to withdraw from the cooperative. Commingling federal funds and projects among districts can also lead to dissension.

Financial questions involving several districts...can be even more troublesome.

It may be prudent, therefore, to obtain the unbiased view of an outside agent for monetary issues. A local accountant, for example, might be willing to donate time to demonstrate how various financial arrangements might be structured to everyone's advantage. In addition, some state departments or intermediate service districts provide assistance and financial advice without charge.

8. Use of support organizations

Since the organizational structure which best governs a cooperative venture is the one which governs least, and members must have a stake or ownership in a cooperative for it to succeed, it may also appear reasonable to assume that outside consultants should be avoided. Most often, however, that proves not to be the case. Outside agents, agencies or consultants can provide useful services to rural cooperatives for the duration of the cooperative's existence, but are of particular importance at two critical moments in a cooperative's lifetime: first, at its inception; and second, when the cooperative faces apparently unresolvable conflicts.

An agency or person(s) with experience aiding cooperative groups can forestall or prevent many of the difficulties which new ventures encounter. An experienced outsider can point out different options for districts in organizational structure, purpose and goals. The consultant should never make decisions for a

set of cooperating districts–nor should a cooperative surrender that power–but he or she can clarify the consequences of particular choices.

In addition to serving as a knowledge base, the outside agent can also act as a sounding board for different participants. Ideas which need airing can be artfully discussed through the neutral party, and a skillful facilitator can encourage beneficial ideas or discourage destructive ones. The facilitator can keep all parties on task–an essential chore, especially for a cooperative start-ups , which may meander into non-essential areas quite rapidly. (A long-winded discussion of the "what-ifs," for example, can be time consuming and ultimately pointless. Whose name goes first on the letterhead can be equally deadly.) A facilitator should be able to foresee areas of difficulty and keep a discussion steered in the proper direction.

But perhaps the most important role of the outside agent is to increase feelings of ownership and decrease suspicion among participants.

But perhaps the most important role of the outside agent is to increase feelings of ownership and decrease suspicion among participants. An idea or suggestion raised by the facilitator loses much of its political impact. The same suggestion made by the largest member of a cooperative (or the smallest) may be seen as threatening or coercive.

The second time when an outside consultant can be of tremendous service is in smoothing over issues which arise which appear insurmountable. Again, the experiences of the outside consultant will benefit the cooperative since a solution to a problem which is not inherently evident may be so to the outside consultant.

There is another, not always immediately evident, benefit to employing an outside consultant in rural settings. The consultant or supervising agency, especially if they are permanently included in the cooperative structure, provide stability. Rural administrators and teachers are frequently in positions with

considerable turnover. An outside agent who stays in place provides a link to the past. Second, the use of an agency such as an Educational Service District confers the additional benefit of linking the cooperative to state agencies, thereby widening the resource and expertise base of the cooperative.

9. Size and number of participants

A cooperative can have any number of districts and still be successful, but large cooperatives with dozens of members tend to be managed either by an outside agency or an independent organization. The types of cooperatives which are the primary focus of this paper, though, seem to operate optimally with no more than seven or eight members.

Eight, though, seems to be an upper limit where the cooperative structure begins to shows distress.

A cooperative venture of only two districts could be considered as simple sharing and is usually straightforward both in format and execution. Each additional member, though, intensifies the challenge of coordinating cooperative activities. The addition of a third district allows for shifting alliances, increases scheduling difficulties (District A and B can meet, but C can't; District C and A can meet but B can't; etc.) and complicates finances. Once the appropriate level of structural organization has been established for three districts, however, the cooperative can incorporate additional members without substantial strain. In other words, if a functioning cooperative has four members, adding a fifth (or a sixth) should not prove particularly burdensome.

Eight, though, seems to be an upper limit where the cooperative structure begins to shows distress. Once a cooperative reaches ten, for example, the organizational format which was acceptable for three to eight participants is usually inadequate. Almost inevitably the cooperative fractures along predictable lines: enrollment or geography, for example, with the smaller districts tending to

cluster together or the northern (or southern or eastern) districts doing likewise. This rule of thumb–the eight district ceiling–is mirrored in the experience of rural athletic districts which contain, almost without exception, eight schools.

The second, almost inevitable consequence of too many members is the need for a formal, supportive bureaucracy. A cooperative of ten districts with multiple, wide-ranging responsibilities requires an administrator or full time supervisor. Paying the salary and benefits of an administrator is costly, and a cooperative which is so large that the smaller participants once again feel dwarfed is detrimental.

10. Begin with a visible success

In a rural setting the initial impetus for forming a cooperative effort is often the recognition that an individual district cannot thrive solely on its own resources. Other powerful motivators include cost savings and preserving programs. It is essential then, that any new cooperative venture be visibly successful, and quickly. A viable cooperative must demonstrate that it can forestall consolidation or closure, provide cost savings or enhance or preserve programs.

The new cooperative, then, is under considerable pressure to furnish evidence that it can meet its stated purpose. A cooperative should select a realizable, tangible activity or event which can serve as visible proof of its effectiveness. A cooperative which aims to enhance science programs, for example, can sponsor a science fair. This initial, simple success should serve as a stepping stone to future, more complicated enterprises.

11. Benefit for individuals as well as the group

Each member of a cooperative must believe that their time and effort is sufficiently recompensed. The cooperative itself cannot be the only benefactor. If a set of districts jointly employs a support professional–a school nurse, for example–then each individual district must feel that it is benefitting from the access to health services. If an individual district senses that it is subsidizing the other districts, and the benefit of the shared service to their district is minimal, the cooperative effort will be less likely to succeed. A cooperative can reach its goals but still collapse if individual members do not realize any gains.

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
COOPERATIVE PLANNING GUIDE

Many researchers (Thomas 1987, Beder 1984, Boyer 1981, DeBevoise 1986, and others) have described general guidelines for successful cooperative efforts. What follows, then, is a synthesis of those writings on possible steps to consider when creating rural school district cooperatives. The process outlined in these pages is comprehensive and is likely to be more detailed than necessary for the majority of rural cooperative undertakings. Each of the steps, however, is valuable in its own right and bears at least some consideration. Time invested in planning and in attending to what appear to be minor details can reap significant dividends later.

Thomas (1987), in her excellent guide to interdistrict cooperative formation, stresses that districts are well advised to look at cooperative or collaborative activities *after* evaluating other alternatives. Thomas writes that this step is essential because districts may find that cooperatives are more complex, costly and difficult to sustain than participants realize.

cooperative efforts require extensive planning. Meetings between districts, the drafting of formal agreements, and settling policy issues are all time-consuming activities.

The identification of district priorities and goals and the resources available to meet them can be viewed as entailing four steps:

1. Identify and Rank School District Functions and Goals

   A rural district should be able to confidently identify its purposes and educational role in the rural community. District goals and functions should be assigned priorities.

2. Examine Short and Long-term Community Changes

   A rural district should be aware of demographic changes which will impact its ability to provide a quality education. The local economy, levels of population growth or decline, stability and/or availability of teaching staff, etc., are all conditions which will affect district policy choices.

3. Identify District Resources

   Occasionally resources will be overlooked, although in small, rural schools, that is unlikely. Other programs, however, may be sources of money or personnel. Small class sizes, for example, may have to be adjusted upward to ensure a comprehensive academic program.

4. Evaluate Alternative Strategies

   Forming or joining a rural cooperative is one of several strategies which are available to a small, rural district. Returning to the foreign language example, a small, rural district may select one of the following options:

   - the district declines to provide foreign language instruction
   - the district locates and hires a multiple-certificated instructor (thereby preserving other programs)

Rural districts often prefer to remain independent. Even though interdistrict cooperation in and of itself may have impressive benefits, and may be the preferred mode of operation for all districts, there is still overt or covert pressure–in both rural or non-rural settings–to demonstrate that the district is capable of educating the youth of their own community without outside assistance.

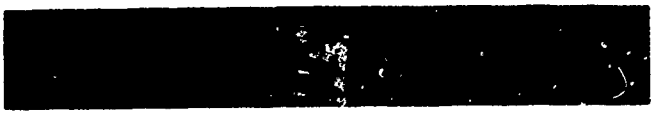
It is wise, therefore, to initiate consideration of interdistrict cooperation with an indepth analysis of district goals and resources. If a rural district has identified a program deficiency–foreign language instruction, for example–but lacks the resources to provide it, then a careful examination of district priorities is a logical first step.

Analyzing district goals, priorities and resources allows a district to decide if a specific program should be funded by shifting resources from other district programs. Would it be better to redirect monies from one area–temporarily postponing building maintenance, for example–to support foreign language instruction? Is foreign language instruction a priority of sufficient value that the district should consider reallocating resources? Or might it be in the best interests of the district to forego foreign language instruction entirely?

All districts benefit from the regular, systematic review of goals, priorities and resources. In addition, identifying demographic changes which will affect the district should be considered. Recognizing that the district is poised for growth (or decline) should influence district policies. Committing to jointly purchase a satellite dish, for example, when enrollment is projected to drastically decline, may prove an unwise use of district resources.

A properly run (or even poorly run) cooperative requires the investment of district resources. Besides the fiscal commitment, a district should be aware of the potential allocation of considerable administrative time. Initial interdistrict

- the district successfully solicits assistance from the local business community
- the district forms a cooperative with three neighboring districts and they jointly hire a foreign language instructor



Once the decision to join or form a cooperative venture has been reached, a small, rural district should carefully assess the options available to it. In many circumstances, the district will be able to identify an existing cooperative which will enable it to overcome its resource deficiencies. In other cases, it may be necessary for a small, rural school to seek out compatible partners in a new cooperative venture.

A rural school considering cooperatives as a viable option, then, would be well-served by increasing its knowledge of other educational organizations. In most cases, geography will determine the most logical cooperative partners. Once a set of potential partners has been identified, a rural district should attempt to determine which of the potential partners (existing cooperatives, other districts, or supportive agencies) would provide the most complementary match. Consideration should be given to each of the following items:

- Determining the potential partner's operating philosophy: is it open or closed? Are they willing to discuss district shortcomings honestly and candidly?
- Investigating the record of the partner: has it successfully conducted cooperative ventures in the past, or is it currently involved in one?
- Assessing district or cooperative resources–staff time, finances. Are they available for the development or maintenance of a cooperative?

- Identifying the level of administrative turnover–have key staff made a long term commitment to the cooperative venture?
- Evaluating the partner's negotiation skills–is there sufficient negotiation and administrative skill to manage conflicts?
- Identifying organizational leader's commitment to cooperative activities–do the participants believe that the cooperative provides a benefit to all?

[redacted]

If a small, rural district locates a suitable, existing cooperative, applies for membership, and is accepted, then the cooperative organizational structure is pre-determined. If a small, rural school has prepared itself adequately, and is aware of the consequences of joining the cooperative, the transition should proceed relatively smoothly.

When a small, rural district is entering or developing a new cooperative, however, it has to carefully select across a wide variety of options. The possibilities for cooperative organizational structures are vast. No one structure or organization has been proven to be ideal. The individual circumstances and philosophy of the cooperating districts will best determine the nature and extent of any rural cooperative. Consideration should be given to the items which follow:

- Identifying similarities and differences among cooperating districts' goals and needs
- Establishing consensus on the cooperative's function(s)
- Determining potential resource flows and their implications:

A. Will students be exchanged/shared?

B. Will teachers be exchanged/shared?

C. Will equipment and materials be exchanged/shared?

D. Will staff be exchanged/shared?

E. Will space be shared?

F. Will money be shared or distributed?

- Determining the scope of the cooperative arrangement
- Examining the potential organizational structures (formal vs. informal, etc.)
- Considering the power relationships among the organizations (will power be shared equally, or will individuals or sub-groups dominate?)
- Determining the degree of formality of the agreements, roles and procedures governing the cooperative
- Determining the mechanism for sharing resources
- Maintaining, evaluating and improving the cooperative arrangement over time

[redacted]

Any small, rural school district cooperative venture will have its own set of goals. Listed below are a set of goals or benefits of cooperatives which may assist rural districts which are evaluating joining or forming cooperatives:

- Increasing learning opportunities for students
- Reducing costs
- Reducing duplication of services
- Decreasing competition with other organizations for funds or other resources (e.g., staff, facilities, students)

- Capitalizing on available opportunities (e.g., grant monies or other funds, facilities, or personnel who have become available at local, regional, state or federal levels)
- Fulfilling state mandate(s) or other requirement(s)
- Assuring the continuance of the district's educational philosophy
- Retaining school district and community identity, pride, and property values
- Improving or maintain school district image
- Responding swiftly to a specific district crisis or pressure being exerted on the district
- Increasing staff development options

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