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ABSTRACT

        In March 2002, 20 principals, superintendents, and
instructional supervisors from the Delta and Black Belt regions of Alabama,
Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi met in a Rural School Leaders Working
Group. They discussed issues, challenges, and opportunities for school
leadership from their perspectives as experienced leaders in what are
arguably the most difficult places in the country to operate a school. This
report summarizes their discussions on issues and concerned related to
improving student learning. Participants reflected on the history of
education in the South, from desegregation to the current emphasis on the
racial achievement gap; examined common assumptions about the role of
professional development and instructional leadership in school improvement;
defined and described "excellence" and what it means for school leadership;
and identified six key impediments to educational excellence. These factors
are shortages of certified teachers and administrators, lack of parent and
community involvement, relevance of professional development to instructional
delivery and student learning, lack of attention to preparing students for a
global society, low expectations for student achievement, and resistance to
change. Participants listed critical topics for school leaders' training and
development. Strategies for rural school improvement in the South are
recommended. Statistical profiles of student race, eligibility for free
lunch, and teacher shortages in the four states are included. (SV)

Rural School Leadership in the Deep South:

The Double-Edged Legacy of School Desegregation

THE RURAL SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY TRUST

by Doris Terry Williams and Jereann King

2

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*The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization rooted in rural America.
The Trust works with a network of schools and community groups striving to improve the quality of
education and community life and to improve state policy on education. We work across the nation but
especially in those rural places distressed by historic patterns of poverty and racism or stressed by
declines in population, major changes in population composition and fundamental economic change.*

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Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Preface

From its inception, the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) has sought to give ear to the diverse voices of rural schools and communities all across America. Those voices are most often underrepresented or missing all together in important discussions about American public education. Yet, rural America has much to contribute to the education debate and much to offer in the way of models of good practice.

On the basis of numbers alone, rural voices deserve to be heard. Nearly 25 percent of Americans (61.6 million people) live in rural places and rural schools make up the largest proportion (24.7 percent) of public schools in the United States. Nearly one in five rural children live below the poverty level, and African-Americans and Hispanics who live in rural places are more likely to live in poverty than their counterparts in inner cities. (Rural Trust 2000)

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching for America's Future brought unprecedented national attention to the looming teacher shortage in America and to the importance of teacher quality in achieving positive outcomes from the American school experience. Calling for a caring, competent teacher in every classroom, the Commission's work and recommendations also brought a high level of scrutiny to higher education institutions and called for massive overhauls and accountability in teacher preparation programs. The Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind" campaign advanced the call for highly qualified teachers and mandated some rather dire consequences for schools that do not measure up to the legislated standards. Increasingly, though with less public fanfare, researchers and practitioners alike are sounding a similar alarm with respect to school leaders.

Several key questions form the core of the growing discussion of school leadership. How can we attract and retain new talent in the school leadership role? How can we attract and retain more candidates of color for school leadership positions? How can we help current school leaders improve their skills, particularly as related to instructional leadership and whole-school improvement? What, indeed, is the role of school leaders in improving the outcomes of schooling, both for students and for the communities they serve? A question that is of particular interest to the Rural Trust and the Rural School Leaders Working Group (Working Group or RSLWG) is: What are the special challenges and opportunities for school leadership within the context of the unique conditions and circumstances of rural places?

Founded in 1995 as the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the Rural Trust works through regional networks of more than 700 rural schools and communities in 35 states. We believe that the conditions and experiences of school leaders in the Delta and Black Belt Regions of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi offer powerful insights into and important lenses through which to view and understand the challenges and opportunities for improving these and other schools. In March 2002, with funding from the Wallace Readers' Digest Fund, the Rural Trust convened a Rural School Leaders Working Group comprised of 20 principals, superintendents and instructional supervisors from those states to discuss the issues, challenges and opportunities for school leadership from their individual and collective perspectives as experienced

leaders in what are arguably among the most difficult places in the country to operate a school. Their insights and articulated needs are reflected throughout this report.

The data collected from the Working Group are summarized in several findings with implications for approaching rural school leadership in the South:

- Leading efforts to improve student achievement in response to state and local accountability standards requires a systematic approach that focuses on the particular circumstances and relationships within the school district. The process also requires extended time frames and attention to organizational and community culture.

- Leading collaborative processes among schools, parents, and communities requires attention to the community's history, culture, resources, and network of opinion leaders, and must incorporate strategies for shared decision-making and inclusive ownership of outcomes.

- School leaders need a broad base of knowledge and skills, which includes organizational development and management; data collection, management and analysis; strategic planning; advocacy; coalition and partnership building; cultural knowledge and sensitivity; instructional leadership and assessment; and curriculum development.

- School leaders can identify the issues and challenges they face in their school districts, but lack data and other evidence, coalitions, plans, and strategies for changing policies that adversely affect their efforts to improve school and student learning.

This is the first of a two-part report intended to give a wider public voice to school leaders in the Delta and Black Belt Regions. It is a first step in creating a network of rural school leaders and partners committed to exploring and creating new knowledge on rural school leadership and to designing practitioner-led professional development initiatives to improve the leadership skills of the Regions' novice, experienced and prospective school leaders. We fully expect what we learn here to serve as a model for school leadership development in other places—rural and non-rural.

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Rural School and Community Trust

Rachel Tompkins, Ed.D.
President
Rural School and Community Trust

Introduction

The Rural Trust has a special interest in the Delta and Black Belt regions[1], having developed and supported significant partnerships with school districts and community-based organizations there over the past six years. In addition, our own research, like that of others, depicts a host of challenges and opportunities for education in that area.

Alabama, for example, ranks very high in the percentage of rural students who live in poverty and in the percentage of students of color attending its schools. Nearly half of rural adults in the state have less than a 12th grade education, and less than half of rural schools have Internet access, among the worst rates in the nation on both counts.

Arkansas leads the nation in the percentage of its students who attend rural schools and is among the leaders in the percentage of rural children in poverty. Rural teacher salaries are among the lowest in the nation, as is the rate of rural school Internet access.

More than half of Mississippi's population lives in rural places, more than one-third of its rural students live in poverty, and close to half of its rural adults have less than twelve years of schooling. Almost half of the state's rural school children are children of color. Demographics make it crucial that Mississippi address the issues of rural education while conditions in rural schools and communities make it more urgent to do so than in any other state.

Louisiana has the third highest percentage of rural students in poverty in the nation and among the lowest average rural teacher salaries. It also ranks among the top ten states in the percentage of rural adults with less than a 12th grade education. (Rural School and Community Trust 2000)

The obvious and highly publicized problems of low teacher quality and short supply, including significant curricula gaps and poor learning outcomes, are often exacerbated in rural communities by their isolation from larger, more urban centers and centralized services, non-competitive salary scales, inadequate facilities and lack of access to educational technology and other resources. At the same time, schools are often the last remaining public institution, the central storehouse of intellectual capital and the controllers of the largest pool of public wealth in the places where they exist. Struggling rural communities, therefore, rely heavily upon their schools to meet community development and sustainability needs, thus placing an even greater strain on schools that are often struggling themselves. Helping rural schools and communities get better together is a major challenge to school leadership in such places.

In the Delta and Black Belt regions, where teacher, administrator and financial shortages abound, there is, unfortunately, no shortage in the distribution of problems related to poverty, low educational achievement, shifting economics, and changing demographics. The ability of school leaders in the regions to respond adequately to educational challenges and opportunities is further complicated by the intricacies and nuances of historic and persistent power relations, racism, prejudice

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[1] The Black Belt, historically, was the soil-rich area in the South that supported plantation economics and slavery. Today, it is largely characterized by high poverty levels, high percentages of African American residents, and a rapidly changing economy.

and the double-edged legacy of school desegregation. Ironically, these same conditions provide the potential for innovation, collaboration and community building that can simultaneously accrue to the benefit of schools *and* communities.

The information in this report was gathered, primarily, from rural school leaders – superintendents, principals, and supervisors – in the Black Belt and Delta regions of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In March 2002, these leaders gathered in Jackson, Mississippi, to discuss the issues and concerns related to improving student learning. Over the course of two days, they engaged in a series of interactive sessions facilitated by the Rural Trust. They reflected on the history of education in the South, examined common assumptions about contemporary school issues, defined and described "excellence," and identified challenges to and opportunities for improving student learning. Based on the discussions and their own practical experiences, the group generated a list of nine topics that they consider critical for school leaders' training and development. They also articulated new questions concerning their personal challenges in leading school improvement that fosters student learning.

The inaugural session of the RSLWG provided an important new forum for school leaders from similar environments, faced with common challenges, to share, analyze, and synthesize their knowledge and experiences. Participants were encouraged to draw from their personal experiences and to consider the broader social, political, and economic circumstances of their districts. The information gathered at this meeting has broad and specific implications for school leadership development, staff development, and school improvement policies.

In addition to the findings from the Rural School Leaders Working Group session, this report includes a brief bibliography of selected literature on school improvement, and data intended to give a clearer picture of the context within which Working Group members work every day. Based on the findings, the literature, and the data, several recommendations for next steps are presented. The report is structured along major topics of discussion on the Working Group's meeting agenda. Processes used to generate discussions at various points are included in shaded boxes throughout the report. Major points, conclusions, or implications of the discussion are presented in boxed statements at the end of each section of the report.

We expect that the Working Group's efforts will ultimately attract and support a broader pool of well-trained principal and superintendent candidates in the hard-to-staff and low-performing school districts in the rural Delta and Black Belt regions. It will surely add to our understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities for school leadership in these and other places.

Statistical Profiles

T he following statistical profiles present a view of the context within which the RSLWG members work. Data are presented by state and district for those districts from which Working Group members come. Some commonly examined indicators (e.g., test scores, per pupil expenditure) are not included because reporting is not uniform across districts and states and comparisons are difficult to make or misleading.

Mississippi

In Mississippi,[3] 54.87% of students were eligible for free lunch in the 2000-2001 school year, compared to 79.63% of the students in RSLWG districts. In two RSLWG districts, over 90% of students were eligible for free lunch. (Figure 1) Districts with the highest percentages of students eligible for free lunch also enrolled the highest percentages of African Americans.

Eighty-six percent of students in RSLWG districts were African American, compared to 51% for the state. Three of the participating districts had African American enrollments in excess of 98%. (Figure 2)

All but one RSLWG district had higher percentages of teachers with emergency licenses than the state as a whole (5.43%). In two districts, the percentage was more than double that of the state (13.92% and 13.33%). Two of the districts with the highest percentages of African American and free lunch eligible students also had the highest rates of emergency licensed

[3] Data on participating districts and the state were taken from State and Local Report Cards published on the Mississippi Department of Education web site for the school year 2000-2001.

Figure 1
Students Eligible for Free Lunch in Mississippi RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001

teachers. Two others had less trouble attracting licensed teachers. (Figure 3)

Figure 2
Students Enrolled by Race in Mississippi RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001

☐ African American ☐ Caucasian ☐ Others
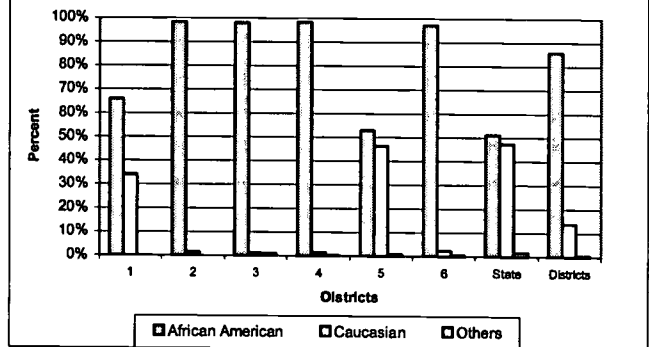
Figure 3
Percent Emergency Licenses in Mississippi RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001
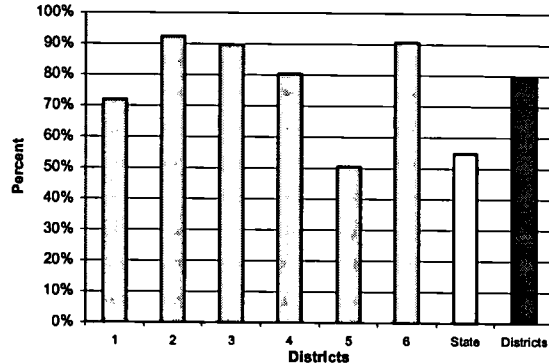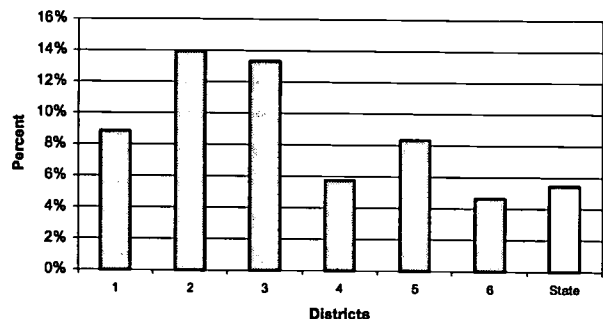
Louisiana

In Louisiana[4], 58.6% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch in the 2000-2001 school year, compared to 77.8% of students in RSLWG districts. In one of the six RSLWG districts, almost 91% of the students were eligible; in the five others, eligibility ranged from 74.5% to 79.2%. (Figure 4)

Among the Louisiana RSLWG districts, 61.2% of the students enrolled were African American in the 2000-2001 school year, compared to 47.7% for the state as a whole. African American student enrollment ranged from a high of 92.6% in one district to a low of 37.7% in another. (Figure 5)

All of Louisiana's RSLWG districts had high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunches, regardless of racial composition. However, the districts with the highest percentages of African Americans also tended to have the highest percentages of eligible students. In the district with the highest percentage of Caucasian students (62%), almost 80% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunches.

All but two of the RSLWG districts had higher than the state percentage of teachers with emergency licenses (10.1%). The districts with the highest percentages of African American students also had the highest percentages of teachers who were not fully certified. In one of the two districts with the highest percentages of African American students, more than half of the teachers were not fully certified. In the

remaining districts, the percentages ranged from 14.4% to 37%. (Figure 6)

Figure 4
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch In Louisiana RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001

Figure 5
Students Enrolled by Race In Louisiana RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001
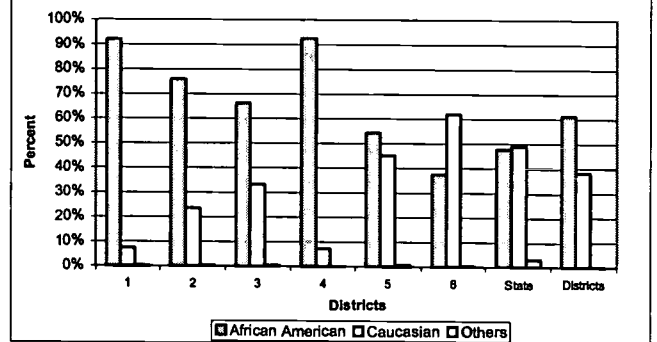
Figure 6
Teachers Not Fully Certified In Louisiana RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001

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[4] Data for Louisiana districts and the State were taken from the 2000-2001 State and District accountability report cards published on the State Department of Education web site.
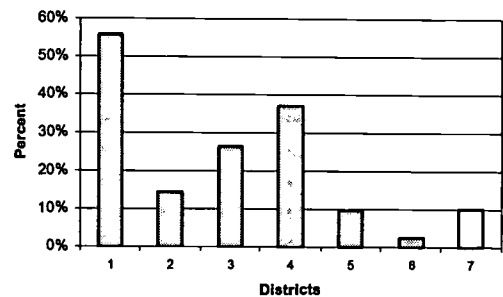
Alabama[7]

Slightly more than 46% of Alabama's students were eligible for free or reduced lunches during the 2000-2001 school year. In the two RSLWG districts, more than 91% of students were eligible. (Figure 7)

As in Mississippi and Louisiana, the percentage of African American students in Alabama's RSLWG districts (99%) in 1999-2000 was greater than that in the state as a whole (39%). (Figure 8)

Data on the percentage of Alabama teachers not fully certified were not readily available.

Arkansas[8]

Only one Arkansas district participated in the RSLWG. In that district, some 93% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunches in the 2000-2001 school year. In the state, 45.7% were eligible. (Figure 9)

In the Arkansas RSLWG district, 97.2% of the students were African American in the 2001-2002 school year, compared to 23.2% for the state. Less than one percent of the district's stud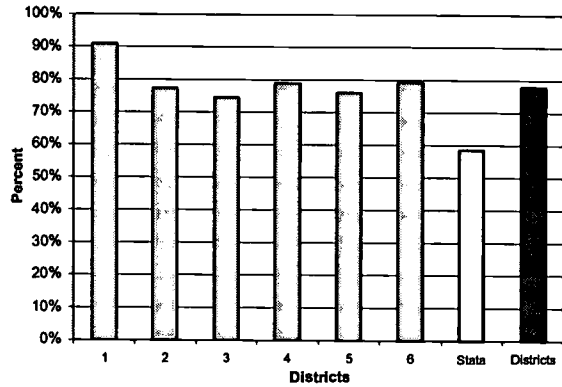ents were Caucasian, and almost two percent were Hispanic. At the state level, 5.5% of students were of other ethnic origins, including 4.1% Hispanic, .9% Asian, and .5% Native American. In this

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[7] Data for Alabama State and Districts were taken from the 1999-2000 Annual SDE Report published on the State Department's web site and from individual district reports for 2000-2001.
[8] Data for Arkansas State and District were taken from the 2000-2001 reports published on the State Department's web site.

Figure 7
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch in Alabama RSLWG Districts and Statewide 2000-2001
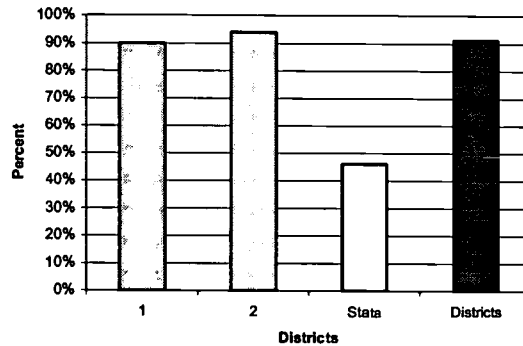
Figure 8
Students Enrolled by Race in Alabama RSLWG Districts and Statewide 1999-2000
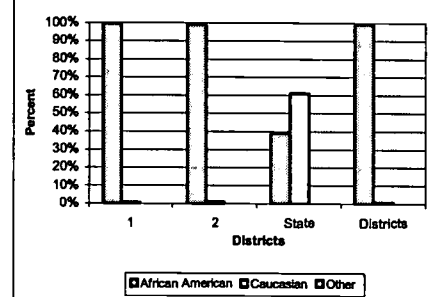
Figure 9
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch in Arkansas RSLW District and Statewide 2000-2001

sense, Arkansas had the most diverse student population of the four Delta and Black Belt states. (Figure 10)

Consistent with the general trend, the RSLWG district, with a disproportionately high percentage of African American students, also had a high percentage of teachers who were not fully certified. In the state as a whole, 5.8% of teachers were not fully certified in 2000-2001, compared to 27.5% in the RSLWG district. (Figure 11)

It is important to note that during the course of the work with the RSLWG, the participating Arkansas school district came under state governance while its high school was targeted for consolidation with a regional high school.

Figure 10
Students Enrolled by Race in
Arkansas RSLWG District and Statewide
2001-2002

Figure 11
Teachers Not Fully Certified in
Arkansas RSLWG District and Statewide
2000-2001

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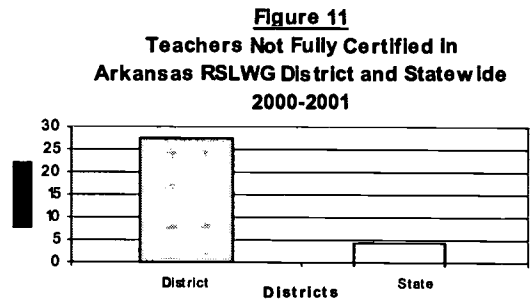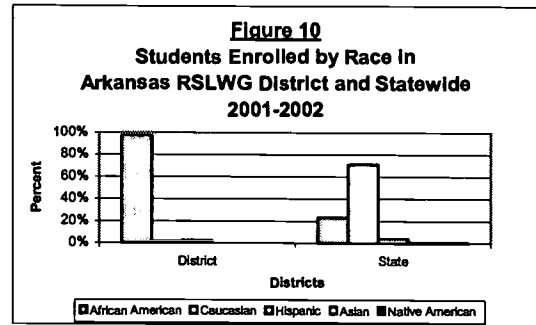
Reflections on History

If you don't know where you're coming from, you don't know where you're going.
--African Proverb

The history of education in the South is full of contradictions — glory and shame, success and failure, emancipation and repression. The concentration of descendants of enslaved Africans in the South through the present time makes that history particularly relevant to the task of building a shared vision of the future.

In her article, *Rural African Americans and Education: The Legacy of the Brown Decision,* Patricia S. Kusimo (1999) notes that the historic 1954 *Brown* decision had a profound impact on rural education for African Americans. The initial, and in some instances, lasting response to the decision by many white communities was to withdraw from the public education arena and establish "white academies." For African Americans, it meant attending white public schools at the expense of losing African American schools, teachers and administrators. As the decision was enforced, other forms of segregation — tracking and "ability grouping" — arose.

The re-segregation of schools via course assignments and ability grouping challenged the faith of African American parents in integrated schools. Says Kusimo:

A pattern develops in which low income minority students experience initial learning difficulties in the early grades, then are evaluated as 'low-ability' and placed in low track, remedial, or special education programs. When they get to high school, they are mostly enrolled in vocational and general programs, while Whites and high-SES

students are most likely enrolled in academic programs.

Like Kusimo, the Rural School Leaders Working Group participants recalled a range of historical codes and events, beginning with the establishment of Rosenwald Schools[11] in the 1920s. After World War II and into the 1950s, their timeline of those codes and events captures the abandonment and abolition of public school laws in the South in response to *Brown v. the Board of Education.* The 1960s were marked by a flurry in the establishment of "private white academies" and "white flight" from the public schools, as the federal government began in earnest to enforce school desegregation laws.

The often debilitating and all-invasive violence of the Civil Rights Movement formed a prominent bridge between the 1960s and 1970s. Nowhere in the country was that violence more prevalent than in Mississippi and Alabama. The impact was immediate, in that it often disrupted schools and was a constant source of stress and fear. It was also enduring, in that it made a lasting imprint on the psyches of African Americans and Caucasians alike, clearly establishing the fact that the end of

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[11] Conceived in the 1920s by Black educator Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee Institute staff, the Rosenwald program represented a massive effort to improve Black rural schools in the South through private partnership. The name came from philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. Rosenwald offered matching grants to rural communities interested in building Black schools.

segregation *de jure* did not mean an end to the evils that had given rise to, justified and sustained it.

> Group Process Note: A time-line activity guided the Working Group's reflection on the history of education in the Delta and Black Belt Regions. The goal was first to connect local events and situations to major historical occurrences, and then to analyze the collective history for social and economic changes. The school leaders were asked to think of important historical events related to education in their school districts or communities. They then wrote the event, the issue to which it related, and the date of the event or circumstance on a Post-it note. They each placed their Post-it notes on a prepared timeline that started after the Civil War and extended to the present.

Full desegregation came to most places in the early 1970s. The decade saw the rise of tracking, student protests and suspensions. Violence continued as patterns of social interaction among African American and Caucasian students began to change. The role of the school in the community began to change as the distance between the two widened. Social events, ceremonies and celebrations that had once been centered in the school were greatly modified or even eliminated in an effort to reduce the risk of fraternization across racial lines.

Homecomings and proms that had given young people the opportunity to practice the social graces were cancelled; students whose learning styles, status and

circumstance did not match the mainstream were labeled and given "special education." The 1980s saw a number of "first" African American superintendents, principals, and school board members in many communities. Examples of discrimination, overlooking and dismissing "qualified" Black administrators, abound. The1980s also saw a rise in school consolidations and expanded curricula.

Expanded curricula would become a part of the double-edged legacy of school desegregation. On the one hand, African American students would, technically, have access to a wider range of academic courses to which they had not had access in their segregated schools. On the other, many of them would be tracked into a host of low-level courses with fancy names, courses that ultimately ensured that they would never achieve the academic standards of their White counterparts who were far less likely to be tracked in that way.

The 1990s ushered in a rise in school violence, magnet schools, first female superintendents, and teaching and school performance and accountability standards. Technology was identified as both a tool and a reason for learning. Home schooling and the slogan "No Child Left Behind" show-up in contemporary history.

The leaders' timeline revealed some clear patterns across all of the target states: "White flight" in the 1950s and 1960s; tracking, special education and changes in school/community relations in the 1970s; leadership struggles in the 1980s; and zero tolerance, new accountability standards and state takeovers of schools in the 1990s and 2000s.

One school leader reminded the group that the violence in schools that appeared on the

timeline in the 1990s was nothing new. He recalled that there has always been violence associated with the education of African Americans in the South, including during the early stages of desegregration, when Black school children as well as Black schoolteachers required armed National Guardsmen to escort them to school.

The school leaders left blank the space on the timeline for future visions. However, some of them voiced a vision that clearly exceeds the minimal standards reflected in state accountability plans. They expressed their deep desire for African American and other historically deprived and oppressed children to build a strong foundation through an education that supports them not only as consumers of goods and services, but as owners of the means to produce them as well.

In many ways, the history and the current condition of education in the South is about race. First, it was racial separation, then racial integration. Now the focus is on achievement by race. Surely there are lessons to be learned from that history that could greatly inform any serious efforts to understand and close the current "achievement gap."

■   It is impossible to understand the dynamics of contemporary Southern rural education without examining the double-edged legacy of segregation and the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education.* Critical to this understanding is the examination of placement and assessment policies that sprang up after integration, and whether or not those policies have served to create more or less equitable conditions for African Americans and other minorities. Indeed, it would be a mistake to ignore the deep significance that school leaders ascribe to issues surrounding the move from segregated to desegregated schools. The move drastically shifted the social, political, and cultural underpinnings of education and of southern society overall, so much so until, even today, there is uncertainty about how to construct an educational foundation that avoids the perils of this legacy. Many of our School Leaders Working Group members carry fond memories of caring teachers, principals and communities that had high expectations for their achievement and success in segregated schools. The nostalgia about school life "back then" or "back in the day" is filled with proud stories of success. At the same time, most also carry less fond memories of outdated textbooks, dilapidated facilities, fewer course offerings and an overall unequal distribution of resources in comparison to other schools.

Assumptions About School Improvement

What school leaders need to know and be able to do in terms of school improvement or school reform is debatable. It was important during the early formation of the Rural School Leaders Working Group to conduct a general assessment of where this group of school leaders stands on a broad range of issues. The literature on school improvement suggested several important areas on which to focus attention, including professional development, instructional leadership and leadership standards.

> **Group Process Note:** To solicit participants' opinions and ideas about selected school improvement issues, workshop facilitators lifted statements from current literature related to leadership and school reform. Most of the statements were adapted from or inspired by SREB's *Leading School Improvement: What Research Says* and addressed the commonly identified issues of professional development, instructional leadership, and leadership standards. Participants were asked to "Take a Stand" on the issues by grouping themselves according to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. They were then asked to discuss and report out their general understanding of the issue at hand.

Professional Development

Several of the discussion statements addressed various aspects of professional development: teacher and administrator preparation and student achievement, school leader access to professional development programs, and school district plans for developing leaders from within.

When asked about the relationship between slow school progress in raising the achievement level of all students and that of teacher and administrator preparation, group members shared a range of opinions. A little over half of the group agreed that *a school's slow progress is related to the inadequate preparation of teachers and administrators, the primary reason being that colleges and universities are not preparing teacher graduates to function fully in actual work roles.* They also felt that while graduates had some background in educational theory, they lacked the understanding and skills of practice that would allow them to "hit the ground running."

Those who disagreed pointed out that many variables, in addition to teacher and administrator preparation, knowledge and skills, impact school achievement. They noted that:

> ... *it is pretty bold to say that teachers and administrators are the sole persons responsible for this issue. Schools are microcosms of their communities, and there are other factors involved in the level of achievement, in particular the supports provided by the states for achieving major accountability standards. In short, there are too many factors involved in this issue.*

Some of the participants also connected schools' slow progress in raising student achievement to the lack of certified teachers and administrators.

Participants overwhelmingly felt that school leaders in the rural Black Belt have access to quality professional development programs, sponsored by their State departments of education and local universities. They said:

> We do have access to professional development. Schools in our area have access because of grants and there is good quality professional development going on within those grants and making it possible financially. The teachers have access to extended professional development.

> We do have departments of professional development and teachers and administrators have access to it. Now the main thing about it is, do we do what we are supposed to do with it? Do we use a needs assessment to identify what our administrators need as it relates to building the district or whatever the case may be? But if we do it right, the access is there. But do we take advantage of it?

One group member had a convincing clarifying opinion, arguing that school leaders do *not* have access to "quality" professional development programs. He saw school finances as a contributing factor and defined the quality of professional development in terms of the *kind* of access and change needed in a specific school. As he saw it:

> *Having access oftentimes means your ability to register, and to get there, and to participate. I think that oftentimes you find that the revenues you have in your budget for professional development activities for school leaders and teachers are often grossly inadequate for you to have the kind of access that is needed to have quality professional development programs that affect the kind of change that you need.*

The most contested aspect of the professional development discussion had to do with whether or not school districts have internal plans for leadership development, systems for creating these plans, and accountability for developing leadership from within. While most of the participants said they have some kind of internal plan for leadership development, a significant number said they did not.

> *There are no plans in place in my district. We take teachers straight out of the classroom and tell them that "next month you are going to be a principal." There are no leadership [development] plans.*

> *When I look at plans for leadership development. I'm thinking of leadership development where teachers are moving from the classroom to become principals and superintendents and instructional leaders for the school district. And with the critical shortage [of certified administrators] that exists, not only in Alabama, but across the nation with the advent of huge numbers of superintendents retiring and there is nobody to replace them, and you look at the plan that districts have in place to ensure that individuals have those kinds of opportunities within, I think in some cases you find that to be true and in some cases you find that not to be true.*

The district representatives who felt strongly that they had internal plans in place for leadership development, and a system for creating plans, directly linked the plan and the process of creating it to their state's accountability plan.

> *We do have plans, and we have some sense of a plan for development and for creating plans. And we are accountable for developing leaders from within because the state's accountability plan makes us accountable for developing these leaders from within.*

Most of the participants agreed, though, that there is a strong disconnect between the development of professional

development plans and accountability for leadership development from within. In other words, although some states require districts to have professional development plans, there is little to connect those plans to the actual development of new or existing school leaders. Having a written plan in place does not translate into an actual leadership development process.

Instructional Leadership

The overwhelming majority of the participating school leaders felt strongly that 1) instructional leadership is an essential part of a leader's role; 2) most current school leaders have not learned to be instructional leaders; and 3) the lack of instructional leadership negatively impacts overall school achievement.

> There is a shortage of administrators, and when we put them in there, they (we) don't have time to be instructional leaders because they spend much of their time fighting fires.

> We believe that there are a good many administrators out there who have not learned to be instructional leaders, but we understand that a lot of school leaders work from a supervisory standpoint,

supervising tasks more so than anything else.

The inability of school leaders to carry out what they agree is a key function relative to student achievement is attributed in large part to the excessive demands on their time to attend to non-instructional related tasks.

Leadership Standards

Can leadership standards, by themselves, facilitate change? While the majority of the group felt strongly that having leadership standards "can" facilitate change, there was considerable discussion about the hegemony of standards in a change process.

> Having standards can facilitate change. Having standards by themselves will not facilitate change.

> We believe that having the standards can facilitate change, but that's not all. You have to absolutely do something with the standards.

Overall, the group agreed that standards play an important role in improving school leadership. However, they were not satisfied with having standards as a stand-alone strategy for facilitating change. Leaders must have help in actualizing the standards in their work.

■   Some states and districts clearly offer a great many professional development opportunities for both current and potential school leaders. However, school leaders have serious concerns about the quality, timeliness and relevancy of many of those offerings. Professional development opportunities must be built around the principles of adult education, taking into account the adult roles and responsibilities of leaders as learners. They must be provided within the context of the work place and specifically related to the immediate needs of the school and the school leader. Further, professional development opportunities must be seen as an integral part of school operations and must not be dependent upon outside funding.

■ The goal of instructional leadership must go beyond improving student performance on standardized tests and against externally imposed standards. Most important for children who have been historically underserved in the region's schools is that it also be "emancipatory." That is, the goal of instructional leadership must be to provide the conditions whereby young people can overcome the negative effects of low expectations, assume more central roles in society as producers of goods and services and, thereby, change the conditions that impair their growth and the growth of their communities. Plans for leadership development, whether existing or yet to be designed, must take this goal into account. At the same time, leadership development must be made accessible to current and future leaders through non-traditional delivery modes, locations, and schedules.

■ Teacher and administrator certification and external accountability pressures weigh heavily in the opinions and beliefs of rural school leaders. Externally imposed standards should take into account, or at least allow for, locally defined standards related directly to locally-defined needs and issues. The evaluation of school leaders must then be directly linked to those standards.

Excellence: What It Means for School Leadership

Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free.
— Frederick Douglass

During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan launched the Excellence in Education Movement in response to America's perceived "crisis" in education. At that time, the crisis was cast largely in terms of America's loss of its competitive edge in global economies. Low academic test results and the rising social issues that were negatively impacting school environments and performance evidenced that loss. Today, the term "excellence" seems more commonly focused on the performance of schools and school personnel, evidenced almost totally by student performance on standardized academic tests.

But how do school leaders define excellence? What are the ingredients? What appearances does excellence take in educational practices and environments? Most importantly for the Rural School Leaders Working Group, what are the implications for school leadership?

Group Process Note:

Participants worked first individually to complete a grid answering three questions: What are the ingredients of excellence? What does excellence look like? What are the implications for school leadership? They then came together in small groups to develop a group response on which they reached consensus. They reported to the larger group only the consensus of their small group.

Ingredients of Excellence

The Rural School Leaders Working Group identified the following as chief among the ingredients for excellence in education:

- *Strong leadership* that advocates for children and insulates them from the negative effects of internal and external politics; motivates staff and unifies them in a commitment to and push towards whole-school improvement; and identifies and works well with parents and the community, including key opinion holders

- *Clear, shared vision* of the purpose and expectations of education in a particular place and high expectations of those responsible for providing it — administrators, teachers, parents, students and the community as a whole — reflected in a well thought out and collaboratively developed strategic plan

- *Sustained parental and community involvement* in the decision-making process and shared accountability for the outcomes

- *High quality, needs-based and locally relevant professional development* delivered in a timely manner, accessible to working professionals, and focused on school improvement

- *Adequate and equitable funding* from state and local governments, supplemented by but not dependent upon funds from external sources

The Look of Excellence

Interestingly, much of what school leaders identified as the ingredients for excellence was also used to describe the look of excellence and the implications for leadership. Particularly interesting, though, is that academic achievement and student learning were far less prominent in the descriptions of the "look of excellence" than were the more administrative-type functions—managing systems, acquiring resources, evaluating teachers. This might be explained by the fact that many school leaders see themselves actually functioning less as instructional leaders than as managers and supervisors of systems and people, despite the fact that they believe instructional leadership is a crucial function for school leaders to fulfill.

Implications for School Leadership

Several themes emerged from examining the ingredients and look of excellence for implications for school leadership. First were the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for effective leaders of "excellent" education.

Second, leaders of excellence in education are effective in many different **roles**. They must, among other things, be

- Visionaries, to focus and refocus the vision with an eye toward the future needs and demands of a local community within a global society

- Effective communicators with diverse and often competing stakeholder groups

- Facilitators of processes for shared decision-making and shared accountability
- Leaders in bringing about parental involvement
- Evaluators, effectively using data to make decisions based on vision and mission, to maintain a focus on achievement and success, and, ultimately, to "get the job done"

Note that the facilitator role is essential in ensuring that all stakeholder groups actively participate in developing the vision and long-range plan for excellence, that they understand and support the plan, and that they feel some sense of ownership and shared accountability for its implementation and outcomes.

Effective Leader Attitudes, Knowledge and Skills
Attitudes • Willingness to change • Good judgment • Valuing of process
Knowledge • Instructional leadership • Resource development to design, implement and sustain programs for change • Effective and maximum use of available resources
Skills • Management (of people, resources and systems) • Ability to motivate people • Collaboration • Communication with diverse stakeholder groups • Facilitation • Leadership development • Planning • Creation of an environment for change

■   Excellence in education is more than providing young people the means to score well on a test. It is providing them the means to change their circumstances, to become informed and contributing citizens in their place, and to unshackle their minds and lift their spirits. It is, in a word, emancipatory. A key to achieving this kind of excellence in schools is the ability of the school leader to share the decision-making role, to elicit and facilitate the involvement of multiple stakeholder groups, and to bring such groups to consensus around a shared vision. Perhaps the greatest challenge here is ensuring that the voices of those who are most immediately impacted by but least often consulted in school matters — parents and students — are heard, validated and heeded.

■   Adequate funding is key to achieving excellence in education. Current school funding formulas often leave systems in low-resource communities struggling to provide basic comfort, supplies and instructional materials. Funding formulas must be redesigned to provide equitable and adequate resources for all students, regardless of where they live or of the economic circumstances of their local communities. In addition, school leaders must have the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to make the best use of available resources, to blend multiple funding streams and focus those resources in a deliberate and well-coordinated fashion that best speaks to the attainment of educational excellence.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Rural School Leaders Working Group identified six key factors that challenge the ability to achieve educational excellence in their particular environments. They are

1. Shortages of certified teachers and administrators
2. Lack of parent and community involvement
3. Concerns for shaping professional and leadership development that directly impacts instructional delivery and student learning
4. Lack of attention to preparing students for a global society
5. Low expectations for student achievement
6. Resistance to change

Group Process Note: Participants were asked to work in groups of six to identify what they had observed in their school districts as challenges to excellence in education. Then, as a group, they considered the opportunities that a particular challenge could present, and, again, considered the implications for leadership development.

Addressing the Teacher and Administrator Shortage

School reform and improvement literature clearly documents the issues regarding the lack of certified teachers and administrators in school districts throughout the country. The realities of the well-publicized data on this issue are seen in rural schools every day in the form of long-term substitutes, out-of- field teachers, and teachers who are otherwise unqualified or under-qualified for the teaching assignments they hold. They are seen in the growing inability of these schools to attract and retain strong leaders, and in the struggle of good leaders to motivate staffs and overcome the challenges of low expectation and stressed resources.

An important part of the solution to this problem is to use aggressive recruitment and salary incentives to attract and keep certified staff. However, having access to additional financial resources is only part of the solution. There must be a pool from which to attract certified teachers and administrators, and a means of supporting them through the early years of their professions and administrative assignments.

RSLWG members see professional development as an important means of addressing the teacher and administrator shortage issues. High quality and well-structured professional development can provide opportunities for uncertified teachers and administrators to up-grade their education levels, improve their skills, and acquire certification. Given the barriers for many individuals to follow traditional certification routes, school leaders strongly emphasize the critical need for alternative certification routes for both teachers and administrators.

Involving Parents and the Community for Change

The lack of parental involvement is often viewed as apathy. However, Working Group members recognize that the lack of

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parental involvement is generally accompanied by a host of barriers, from transportation and scheduling to fears of intimidation and shame. The complexity of this issue is often underestimated, and, in many instances, its solutions are not considered as an integral part of a school-wide strategic plan.

The school leaders see the conditions that bar parental involvement, such as teen pregnancy and high illiteracy rates, as opportunities for effectively involving parents in supporting their children's education, while impacting the very conditions that are barriers to their participation. For example, engaging parents in early childhood curriculum development is an opportunity to teach them language skills appropriate for school success. Offering parenting, adult literacy and basic education classes in the school can provide another avenue for parent involvement. Providing childcare and other relevant services while parents participate in these activities is critical.

The implications for school leaders are: 1) to lead a participatory process to define and make explicit parental roles and schools' expectations and 2) to collaborate and build supportive partnerships that can help put in place those things that would enable parent participation.

School leaders understand the importance of the voices, eyes, and opinions of influential community members. The challenges of community involvement provide opportunities to organize and effectively utilize the power of key opinion leaders and to include them in the decision-making process. This is particularly important for smooth transitions when initiating new policies and changes within the school. Some of the school leaders see their role as identifying major community

players and having a working relationship within clearly established boundaries. The long-term goal for both parental and community involvement is to promote social changes in families, schools, and communities.

Shaping Professional Development for Instructional Delivery

On the issue of professional development for instructional leadership, the school leaders' primary concerns relate to the potential impact of professional development on the quality of instructional delivery. Inconsistent with their notion that school leaders should be strong instructional leaders, but consistent with the reality that quality instruction is typically seen as the sole responsibility of the classroom teacher, they did not consider their own learning needs and skills development at this time but that of their teaching staff. They were particularly keen on the need for staff development that is focused on and relevant to classroom practices. Teachers need to be adept at student-centered curriculum development. The leaders' task, then, is to motivate teachers to set learning goals and to plan and implement follow-up to their staff development activities.

Educating for Change by Envisioning the Future

School leaders in some districts are challenged by the need to educate students for a global society, especially since there is limited use of computer technology by some teachers. The concern relates to "education from a future world perspective" and to preparing students for jobs that currently do not exist. How do we envision the technical skills that will be critical to the workforce in the next two decades? How can teachers explore and

model the use of computer information technology in their classrooms?

One group of school leaders views the increased use of computer information technology as an opportunity to explore these questions. For them, it means creating and supporting a broad frame of learning that enhances teachers' abilities to provide students with a variety of technology enhanced learning experiences.

Conquering Low Expectations through Motivation

Expecting and accepting low educational achievement is a pervasive attitude that sometimes shrouds entire communities. It is especially problematic when a community's population is significantly African American, and the attitude becomes both internalized and externalized. Many of the school leaders connect the "low expectation" syndrome to southern school desegregation. Reflecting on their own early education experiences in segregated schools, where teachers, principals, and parents held high expectations for achievement, these leaders struggle with ideas for reclaiming from a past era a spirit of success. They identified the need for "motivation" to be seen as an essential process and a goal in long-range planning. Overcoming the internalized attitude of low expectations is a priority if school districts are to raise achievement levels and meet accountability standards.

Moving Beyond Resistance to Change

A systematic approach to instituting change is of paramount concern to school leaders. The need for and resistance to change filters throughout school performance, operations, and policies, and affects students, teachers, administrators, school board members, and the community as a whole. Nepotism and external political pressures figure heavily in the resistance to change. A situation such as replacing ineffective yet influential teachers and administrators can become a major problem for a school leader, tying up energy and resources, damaging long-standing relationships, and threatening job security. Leaders need effective strategies for changing attitudes, instructional roles and school board policies, and for impacting how change is actually implemented once new policies and roles are set. One possible strategy for moving beyond resistance is to identify and support those in the system who are least resistant to change and to use shared leadership and decision-making processes to include them in the change process.

Resistance to change is often couched in terms of limited resources. Therefore, school leaders see the need for more information and knowledge about funding sources, for staff skilled in grant writing and for stronger linkages between their fundraising and development activities and the visioning and strategic planning process.

■   Facing the challenges to excellence is not so simple as setting and reaching to attain standards. It invariably means overcoming resistance to change, advocating for and crafting new policies, taking new actions, and implementing new strategies. It often means confronting old adversaries, challenging old practices, and altering old relationships. Leaders who are sincere about their roles must see themselves as change agents, identify those around them who are most open to and ready to embrace change, and make them full partners with key leadership roles in the change process.

Success: What Works and
What It Tells Us About Leadership

The initial meeting of the Rural School Leaders Working Group intentionally focused on the challenges to excellence in their local places. Hence, much of the focus of this report is on the negative aspects and conditions of the work. It is important to note, however, that all of the leaders had a great deal to say about their successes, about what is working for them and why. Many innovations are under way, and there is great hope for the future of education within the regions. A small group of leaders were asked to take center stage and, in a structured conversation, share some of the successes that have been achieved under their leadership.

> **Group Process Note:**
> Four school leaders volunteered to take center stage among their peers in a Fish Bowl exercise to talk about what was working for them. They were asked to use a specific incident in which they were conscious of themselves as change agents leading a change process. The audience then discussed the implications of what they had heard for what school leaders will need to know and be able to do in order to lead successful change efforts in their local places.

One leader talked about implementing the Great Expectations Program, which engages young students in activities to build self-concepts and school appreciation. Another talked passionately about two areas in which his leadership made a difference, personnel evaluations and instructional delivery. First, he made explicit that overall school and student performance was tied directly to principal and teacher performance. He then worked with principals to make sure they understood the importance of being instructional leaders in their schools. He stressed that teachers have to learn to teach across the curriculum, and that it is the principal's responsibility to monitor and provide appropriate support for teachers to provide quality instruction.

A third school leader shared a success story that was five years in the making. She talked in great detail about the steps involved in improving instructional delivery. Hired to improve instructional delivery in her local system, she spent a year observing classroom instruction to determine what the priorities were for student achievement. After identifying language arts as an area for improvement, she formed a team of teachers to research the problem and to identify successful models within other schools. She requested support from the superintendent for meeting and travel times. The team worked together for two years, gathering information and visiting other schools. The data were compiled and synthesized, whereupon the team developed its own framework for improvement. The teachers involved on the team were the model teachers, and their classrooms became pilot sites for instituting the new framework. After refining the model, she and the teachers were then ready to extend its use to other classrooms. Reflecting on the experience, she felt that it was important to have enough time and to involve teachers in actively solving problems related to teaching and learning.

Finally, one superintendent talked about leading an inclusive process with key community members, the Board of Education, teachers and other school personnel, students and parents, business leaders, and social service agencies. Essentially, representatives from the entire community were involved in creating a vision for education in the district and in developing a strategic plan to reach the vision. The participant talked about the dynamics of the process, why it was important to have "buy-in" from the entire community, and what it meant to bring people through a process that resulted in a document, a strategic plan, of which the community had ownership.

These are only a few examples of participants' successes and of their experiences with leading change in their school districts. The entire group was then asked to think about what they heard as important elements of leadership during the testimonials, and to consider, based on what they had heard, what topics would need to be included in school leadership development training. The group brainstormed a list of topics, and then underscored the following nine as critical for school leaders' training and development:

1. Data usage to inform decision-making
2. Classroom observation and evaluation
3. Standards-based education
4. Needs driven, job-embedded professional development, based on expected student outcomes
5. Strategic inclusion for community involvement
6. Cultural sensitivity training that considers history and the unique aspects of the local place
7. Time management
8. Business and fiscal affairs
9. Collaborations and partnerships

■   School leaders greatly appreciated the opportunity to hear from others about what was working in their schools and school systems. The sharing was perhaps made more meaningful by the fact that success was happening in hard places and situations that were not unlike theirs.

Personal Problems and Challenge Statements

Even though the school leaders had shared personal stories and identified critical topics for leadership development, they had not had an opportunity to think specifically about their individual challenges and the particular problems they faced. Participants were asked to write their personal challenge statements and to identify questions they had about their particular problem, the information or data they needed to help them understand the problem, and other issues that needed consideration.

The statements that the leaders generated exposed some topics that had not surfaced earlier—classroom discipline, issues concerning local school boards of education, adjusting to different cultural personalities.

The issue of classroom discipline surfaced most clearly when a relatively new principal talked about her experiences with Teach for America teachers. In her district, as in many others, most of these teachers are young and White. Compared to other classroom teachers, they tend to have the most difficulty in classroom management and discipline. The principal observed that:

> While Teach for America teachers are well trained in instructional delivery and are innovative in their practices, they most likely don't have the skills, know how and experience to run a well-disciplined classroom.

The challenge of discipline and Teach for America teachers also raised the issue of cultural sensitivity and diversity in school settings. Different cultural norms and expectations, between schools and communities, teachers and parents, African Americans and Caucasians, and now a growing number of Hispanics, cause tensions around appropriate discipline, teaching and learning styles, and interactions with community people and parents. Policies ranging from the number of excused days for family deaths to requirements for parent involvement are interpreted through cultural values and beliefs. Considerably more cultural diversity training and awareness are needed at all levels of the school and community.

Several of the school leaders were personally and professionally challenged by the politics of the local school board. The issue is primarily related to board roles and responsibilities and the tendency of boards to micromanage superintendents and local school affairs. There is also concern about school board and individual school member misuse of their powers to influence hiring and firing of teachers and administrators.

Conclusion

Rural school leaders from the Delta and Black Belt regions have a firm understanding of the educational challenges to and opportunities for improving student learning. However, a number of elements converge to make leading change difficult: the complexity of the historical legacy, the challenges of responding to the rising stakes and external pressures of accountability with limited resources, the frustration of building lasting partnerships to impact educational achievement, the timeliness of professional training and development for teachers and administrators, and the recognition of their own learning needs. Solutions are not easily defined and implemented.

The data collected at this meeting resulted in several findings with implications for approaching rural school improvement in the South:

1. Leading efforts to improve student achievement in response to state and local accountability standards requires a systematic approach that focuses on *the particular circumstances and relationships within the school district.* The process also requires extended time frames and attention to organizational and community culture.

2. Leading collaborative processes among schools, parents, and communities must take into consideration the community's history, network of opinion leaders, and strategies for building inclusive processes and ownership of outcomes.

3. School leaders need a broad base of knowledge and skills in areas including organizational development and management, data collection and management, the use of data to inform decision-making, strategic planning, advocacy, coalition and partnership building, instructional delivery and assessment, and curriculum development.

4. School leaders can identify the issues and challenges they face in their school districts, but lack data and other evidence, coalitions, plans, and strategies for changing policies that adversely affect their efforts to improve school and student learning.

Based on these findings, the following next steps are recommended:

1. In developing an action plan, the Rural School Leaders Working Group should prioritize its list of training and development topics, select the top two or three, and provide intensive teaching and learning support through training activities and institutes over the next 18 months.

2. School leaders should follow up on the questions they articulated as part of their personal challenge statements and devise an action research project to (1) address the particular challenge and (2) use as a school-wide model for building

knowledge, expertise, and problem solving.

3. School leaders involved in the initiative should decide on policy advocacy issues and goals and agree on processes for collecting data and additional information to support policy changes.

4. Resources should be available to support school leaders in data collection and to develop case studies that document aspects of their particular change and leadership efforts for student improvement.

Overall, the inaugural meeting of the Rural School Leaders Working Group provided an important opportunity for school leaders from similar environments, faced with common challenges, to share, analyze, and synthesize their knowledge and experiences. The meeting was a first step in creating a network of rural school leaders in the South committed to exploring and creating new knowledge on rural school leadership issues. The school leaders in this group will have another opportunity to contribute their experiences, ideas, and knowledge at the fall Rural School Leaders Working Group meeting in which they will begin to design a practitioner-led leadership development program for school leaders.

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34

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35

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