



## A FOCUSED LOOK AT RURAL SCHOOLS RECEIVING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

*The Study of School Turnaround is a set of case studies of the school improvement process in a purposive sample of 35 schools receiving federal funds through the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program over a three-year period (school years 2010-11 to 2012-13). This evaluation brief focuses on the nine SIG schools that were in rural areas and how respondents in these schools perceived their rural context to influence specific turnaround activities. Key findings that emerged from the rural case study data collected in spring 2012 include:*

- *Although rural SIG schools reported some challenges that nonrural SIG schools have also reported, such as low student motivation and staff morale, the rural schools reported additional challenges resulting from their schools' remote locations and large catchment areas. For example, respondents reported that these rural characteristics affected the recruitment or retention of teachers and, to a lesser extent, parents' involvement in the schools.*
- *School and district administrators in eight of the nine schools suggested that long teacher commutes or isolated communities posed challenges to recruiting or retaining teachers. To counter these challenges, respondents in two schools reported offering direct support for teacher commutes (for example, gas stipends or vans), and respondents in three schools reported offering signing bonuses to incoming teachers.*
- *School and district administrators and teaching staff in the nine schools mentioned multiple factors limiting parent involvement in school-based activities. Respondents from five schools perceived that a lack of access to transportation limited parent involvement, whereas respondents from three schools noted that the distance between schools and parents' homes was a contributing factor. Four schools focused on hiring or expanding the role of parent liaisons to increase parent involvement.*

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## Introduction

Understanding how context may influence improvement efforts in low-performing rural schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIG) may generate insights into the challenges and strengths of rural SIG schools as they seek to turn around a history of low performance. For example, rural schools typically serve small communities and are farther from large population centers than nonrural schools, and this could limit access to opportunities for professional development and external support providers, as well as to qualified leadership and staff.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the relatively small size of rural schools and of the communities in which they are located could help promote relationships and collaboration among school staff, parents, and students to improve or sustain student performance.<sup>2</sup>

The rural education literature suggests additional ways that characteristics of rural communities could help shape their districts and schools. Because rural schools serve smaller communities, they have lower enrollments and lack the economies of scale that larger nonrural districts and schools enjoy.<sup>3</sup> Rural districts and schools are also often located in communities with little industry and few employment opportunities, especially following the recession that began in December 2007,<sup>4</sup> and so can find themselves preparing students for postsecondary education and careers that will take them away from their communities. Yet these communities may have limited employment for those students who stay, so some rural educators may try to offer students instruction grounded in the context of their rural communities, a strategy known as place-based education.<sup>5</sup> Its goal is to provide instruction that will further engage students in their studies and encourage them to become leaders for change in their hometown schools and communities during and following high school. Rural schools' remoteness and limited opportunities also can affect the pool of available school administrators and teachers. Prospective staff might not

want to live in a rural community, or the community might have few job opportunities for their spouses. Thus, teacher certification and training programs in some rural (and nonrural) areas may try to focus on developing local talent (“grow your own”) to compensate for the district’s difficulty in attracting and retaining teaching staff from other locales and to staff schools with teachers familiar with and connected to the local community.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education sponsors some grant programs to help those rural schools that are low-performing. The Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) Program, as part of the Department’s Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), allows rural schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress to use funds to support, among other things, teacher recruitment and retention, teacher professional development, and parental involvement activities.<sup>7</sup> In the 2010-11 school year, many low-performing schools, including rural ones, were eligible to receive additional funding to implement improvement actions under the U.S. Department of Education’s SIG program through Title I section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The SIG program, first authorized in 2001, underwent three shifts with the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009. First, ARRA provided a substantial increase in annual SIG funding over three years; for fiscal year 2009, ARRA added \$3 billion to the \$545 million in regular SIG 2009 appropriations. Second, ARRA targeted funds to a much smaller segment of low-performing schools—those in the bottom 5 percent and that had been low-performing for an extended period. Third, ARRA limited the reform options for schools in the two highest-priority groups (SIG-eligibility Tiers 1 and 2) to four intervention models, each with a set of requirements (see Box 1).<sup>8</sup>

### **BOX 1. SIG INTERVENTION MODEL REQUIREMENTS**

#### ***Turnaround Model***

- Replace the principal and allow sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars, and budgeting)
- Rehire no more than 50 percent of the existing teaching staff
- Implement strategies to recruit, place, and retain skilled staff
- Provide capacity-building, job-embedded professional development
- Adopt a new governance structure, such as requiring the school to report to a new district or state turnaround office, or to hire a turnaround leader
- Implement a research-based instructional program that aligns with state standards
- Promote the use of data to inform and differentiate student instruction
- Increase learning time
- Provide socio-emotional and community-oriented services and supports

#### ***Transformation Model***

- Replace the principal and allow sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars, and budgeting)
- Use teacher and principal evaluations systems that account for student growth
- Implement strategies to recruit, place, and retain skilled staff
- Provide capacity-building, job-embedded professional development
- Implement a research-based instructional program that aligns with state standards
- Promote the use of data to inform and differentiate student instruction
- Increase learning time
- Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement
- Ensure the school receives appropriate technical assistance and support

#### ***Restart Model***

- Reopen a school under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization

#### ***Closure Model***

- Close the school and enroll its students in other, higher-achieving schools in the district that are within reasonable proximity of the closed school

Approximately 18 percent of the SIG schools from the two highest-priority groups (SIG-eligibility Tiers 1 and 2) funded in 2010-11 were in rural areas.<sup>9,10</sup> Rural SIG schools were more likely than nonrural schools (95 versus 74 percent) to adopt the transformation model, one of the four allowable SIG models. State policymakers have reported that the three other SIG models (turnaround, restart, and closure) were often not feasible for their rural schools because of the difficulty in (1) finding replacements for 50 percent of their teaching staff, as required by the turnaround model; (2) accessing charter management organizations, as required by the restart model; or (3) identifying alternate schools for students to attend, as required by the closure model.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Study of School Turnaround is examining the change process in a purposive sample of 35 SIG study schools, this evaluation brief focuses only on the experiences of the 9 rural SIG schools in the sample (henceforth, the rural schools), using data collected in spring 2012 via site visits and a teacher survey. Although these rural schools represent a range of geographic regions and grade levels, they are not necessarily representative of rural SIG schools nationwide. Instead, they were chosen to illustrate the challenges that some schools in rural settings may encounter as they attempt to implement improvement efforts.

Eight of the nine rural schools adopted the SIG transformation model, while the ninth school adopted the turnaround model. (Box 2 contains additional information on the Study of School Turnaround, the rural schools in the sample, and the data collection and analytic methods; Appendix A provides a more detailed description of the study's data collection and analytic methods.)

In the next two sections, we provide an overview of the nine rural schools' contexts and challenges to turning around their history of low performance. Although these schools reported multiple challenges, in the sections that follow, we focus on those challenges related to recruiting and retaining teachers and increasing parental involvement. We explore how respondents in these schools perceived their rural context to influence staffing and parental involvement, and what improvement actions, if any, they reported implementing in these two areas. Boxes 3, 4, and 5 provide case studies of three rural schools to further detail certain challenges related to a rural school's context and improvement actions to address the challenges.

## BOX 2. STUDY OVERVIEW AND SAMPLE

### *Overview*

The Study of School Turnaround is a series of case studies examining the school improvement process in a diverse sample of schools receiving funds from the SIG program. Starting in 2010-11 and over a period of three years, this study has documented, primarily via site visits and a teacher survey, the change process in a purposive sample of 35 schools from a variety of state and local contexts. It is designed to describe the characteristics of these SIG schools, the decisions and strategies the schools and their school districts undertake (and why), and the challenges they face as they attempt to improve student outcomes.

The study includes three overlapping subsamples drawn from the sample of 35 schools. These subsamples are (1) a core group of 25 schools, (2) 11 schools with a high proportion of English language learners, and (3) 9 schools in rural settings (the focus of this evaluation brief). This study is not intended to examine student achievement outcomes and does not include a representative sample of grantees nationwide. Rather, the study is an in-depth examination of how the SIG program is being implemented in a particular set of schools.

### *Rural School Sample*

The nine schools that are the focus of this evaluation brief were purposively selected to include schools with a rural designation in 2009-10 according to the urban-centric locale code in the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data. The sample includes five high schools and four elementary schools from eight districts and four states. During school year 2009-10, seven of the districts were classified as rural and one as suburban. Eight schools implemented the SIG transformation model and one implemented the turnaround model.

The schools and districts in the rural sample ranged in size and student population, according to the 2010-11 Common Core of Data:

- Among the eight districts, three have from 18,000 to 55,000 students, and five districts have from 300 to 1,800 students. The district with the lowest enrollment consisted of just two schools, whereas two of the larger districts were located in states with county-based district consolidation.
- Six of the nine rural schools have student populations from 200 to 450, two serve approximately 600 students, and only one school has more than 1,000 students. The average student enrollment in the schools is 489, compared to an average student enrollment in the nonrural study schools of 872.
- Across the rural schools in the study, the students were 45 percent Hispanic, 23 percent black, and 22 percent white. Hispanic students constituted over half the student population in five schools, white students did so in one school, and African-American students did so in one school. In the two remaining schools, no student group constituted over half the student population.

### *Data Collection*

Study team members conducted a site visit to each of the nine rural schools in spring 2012. Site visits lasted approximately two days in each school, and included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with district and school stakeholders, including district administrators, principals, coaches, parent liaisons, teachers, parents, and students (in high schools only). Discussion topics included (1) the overall change process in each school, including key challenges to school improvement, the actions being implemented, and how the school's rural setting contributed to these challenges or influenced improvement actions; and (2) the schools' improvement experiences related to increasing parental involvement and recruiting and retaining teachers. Because this study is focused on the school improvement process, our interview questions also focused on these general issues in the rural sample. However, we did include more specialized probes to ensure that we gathered sufficient data to examine certain rural issues of interest.

All teachers in each of the nine rural schools were also invited to complete a 10-minute survey, which included questions about teachers' education levels, school roles and experiences, and perceptions of the school's challenges and teaching environment. The average response rate was 79 percent per school.

See Appendix A for additional information on the data collection and analytic methods.

## Context of the Nine Rural Schools

In some respects, the nine rural schools in this study are similar to nonrural schools also receiving SIG. For example, like all SIG schools, the nine rural schools had a history of low student achievement, being in the bottom 5 percent of performance in their state for a period of time. Although on average a smaller percentage of rural students live below the poverty level compared with their counterparts in towns and cities,<sup>12</sup> rural and nonrural SIG schools are more likely to serve low-income populations compared with non-SIG schools from all locales. During the 2009-10 school year, 68 percent of students in SIG schools, on average, were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch, compared with 45 percent in non-SIG schools.<sup>13</sup> On average, 77 percent of students in the nine rural schools in this study were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch during the 2010-11 school year.<sup>14</sup> Among the nine rural schools, respondents from four located in farming or agricultural communities described high student mobility. A review of national survey data by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that higher rates of mobility are associated with lower student achievement and that students with higher rates of mobility most often had limited English proficiency, were members of low-income families, or were children of migrant families (which are common in rural areas).

Rural SIG schools do share, to varying degrees, three characteristics related to their setting that distinguish them from nonrural SIG schools and may influence their school improvement efforts: (1) distance to an urban center or metropolitan area, (2) geographic spread with low population density, and (3) small community size.

***Distance to an urban center or metropolitan area.*** A rural school's distance to an urban center or metropolitan area can affect its staffing patterns and access to external supports. One review of data on rural school staffing found that rural areas tend to have fewer potential applicants for open teaching positions, and if they are distant from urban centers and metropolitan areas, they might have difficulty recruiting and retaining staff from outside their communities.<sup>15</sup> A rural school's distance from universities and metropolitan centers also can hinder its ability to leverage external professional development opportunities or engage with external support providers.<sup>16</sup> These can be important resources for building school leadership and teacher capacity to turn around low-performing schools.

Distance from an urban center also can affect residents' employment opportunities and, in turn, students' post-high school career opportunities. Respondents from five of the nine rural schools described the surrounding area's main economy as farming or agriculture, with few other employment opportunities, aside from working for the school district itself. Respondents in the four remaining schools described different employers: in two schools from the same county, respondents described the main employers as a local chemical plant and prison, while in the other two schools, respondents perceived the main employers to be in the food service and retail industries.

To gain a better understanding of how the schools compared in their proximity to an urban center as well as community population size, using publicly-available data, we placed each of the nine rural schools along a continuum based on its distance to an urban center and community population size as defined by Common Core of Data urban-centric locale codes, as well as its proximity to, and influence by, larger county-based metropolitan areas. (Appendix B contains information on the data used and the results of this review.) Three schools were categorized as "most remote with the least urban influence," and two were categorized as "least remote with the most urban influence." The remaining four schools fell in the middle ("moderately remote with some urban influence").

We next reviewed site visit data regarding respondents' perceptions of their schools' distance from and influence by urban areas. At two schools, respondents' perceptions appeared to differ from the data-based categorizations. For example, staff at one of the elementary schools categorized as "most remote with the least urban influence" described the students as "urban kids," despite the fact that the closest urban area was more than 40 miles away in a neighboring state. Unlike other school communities in the study where most students did not live within walking distance of one another or a town center, the school staff at this school said that, similar to low-income urban areas, the students live close to one another in the school's small town, many in low-income

housing units. Staff perceived that this close proximity frequently leads to troubling behaviors among young students (such as being out in the streets together late on school nights). In another school categorized as “moderately remote with some urban influence,” staff perceived their school as being rather distant and isolated. The school is surrounded by a desert and abandoned housing units, and school staff explained that there is no library, movie theater, or other forms of entertainment for students. They also reported that the closest town is more than 20 miles away. The principal stated, “[The school] is clearly a distance from the district office. It’s a remote location.”

**Geographic spread with low population density.** Rural schools often serve students from large geographic areas with low population density, which can influence the local tax base and affect a rural school’s ability to recruit teachers, engage parents, and involve students in after-school activities. Many rural schools have lower student enrollments and have to hire more teachers, on a per-pupil basis, to teach the required curriculum than do nonrural schools. This, together with a limited tax base, can affect rural districts’ ability to offer competitive salaries and attract and retain qualified applicants.<sup>17</sup> A survey of more than 3,000 rural superintendents nationwide concluded that the top four reasons for difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers were (1) low salaries, (2) social isolation, (3) geographic isolation, and (4) lack of adequate housing.<sup>18</sup> In addition, families that live in large rural areas, especially low-income families, may have limited public and private transportation options that can impede parents’ involvement in their children’s education and negatively affect students’ participation in after-school programs.<sup>19,20</sup>

The rural continuum categorizations also reflect differences in the population density of the rural schools’ counties. Based on 2010 U.S. Census data, the average population density for the nine rural schools’ counties was 93 people per square mile. The three most remote schools were in counties with an average of 25 people per square mile, and the two least remote schools were in counties with an average of 182 people per square mile. For comparison, in 2010, the average population density in the United States was 87 people per square mile; population density by county ranged from fewer than 10 people per square mile in the most rural areas to more than 300 in dense metropolitan areas.<sup>21</sup>

**Small community size.** Rural communities often have smaller community and school populations than their nonrural counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Although low student enrollment can translate into small class sizes and lower teacher-to-pupil ratios, it also can result in fewer school staff members overall. A national survey of superintendents found that teachers in rural secondary schools with low numbers of school staff are often called upon to teach more than one content area or several subjects in one content area.<sup>23</sup> Teaching multiple content areas and thus having to prepare for several classes can in turn limit opportunities for teachers to plan and collaborate with others teaching similar courses. Some teachers might use technology to address the lack of local collaboration through online networking and sharing of lesson plans and instructional approaches with teachers who are far away.

During the 2010-11 school year, the average student enrollment in the nine rural schools was 489, compared with an average student enrollment of 641 in all SIG-awarded schools for the 2009-10 school year.<sup>24</sup> Teachers from five of the nine schools said that they felt restricted by their schools’ small faculty. One teacher said, “We have to do all the things the bigger districts do, but we have to do it with infinitely less people, playing multiple roles.” However, at least two site visit respondents in four rural schools (with student enrollments from 300 to 675) noted that being in a small school strengthened relationships among staff and students. One respondent said, “I like that it is a small environment. You can build meaningful relationships with coworkers and with students....Everyone goes into teaching to make a difference....We get more opportunities to do that [at a small school].”



## Challenges and Improvement Actions at the Nine Rural Schools

Although the nine rural SIG schools reported challenges similar to those that have been reported in nonrural SIG schools, respondents at the rural schools reported additional challenges resulting from their schools' location and communities' geographic spread. Responses to the teacher survey suggest that the issues perceived as most challenging for the nine rural schools were insufficient parent involvement; low student motivation; and, to a lesser extent, low and/or erratic student attendance, low staff morale, and poor student discipline. (See Appendix C for more details on each school's teacher survey responses.) Similar challenges have been reported in nonrural SIG schools.<sup>25</sup>

During site visits, at least two respondents at six of the nine rural schools also reported that the schools' large catchment area and lack of public and private transportation made it difficult for students to travel to school and stay for after-school activities. (See Box 3 for one rural school's perceived challenges.) For example, according to the district administrator and principal of one such school, most students travel an hour or more on the bus each way. Similarly, administrators from six schools reported that the schools' location relative to most teachers' homes resulted in long teacher commutes. In addition, at least two respondents at three rural schools indicated that their distance to more populated areas limited access to both educational and community supports. For example, one district administrator overseeing two of the nine rural schools noted that "[The schools] are remotely located, and there are not a lot of those types of resources in the area."

According to respondents, the rural setting of the schools also influenced how particular improvement actions were implemented to address the reported challenges. Principals and teachers at the nine rural schools most frequently reported the following improvement actions to increase student achievement (as noted by at least two respondents): (1) increasing student learning time (nine schools), (2) providing professional development activities during the school day through professional learning communities (PLCs) (eight schools), and (3) purchasing technology (six schools). Although these improvement actions have been similarly reported in nonrural SIG schools,<sup>26</sup> respondents in the rural schools highlighted how their schools' rural context influenced two of these improvement actions—increasing learning time and providing job-embedded professional development—which were requirements of the SIG transformation and turnaround models. (See Box 1 for the SIG model requirements.)

Federal SIG guidance gave all SIG schools flexibility in how they increased student learning time. Respondents in two rural schools noted that because of the large catchment area served and issues and costs related to transportation, increasing learning time within the existing schedule rather than extending the school day was the best option. For example, one district administrator said that the district could not extend the SIG school's day because the district's limited bussing capacity is already stretched to reach "schools [that] are already so spread out." To meet the federal guidelines, the district added one minute to each of the school's class periods. In response to SIG requirements, the principal of another school reported offering after-school programming and Saturday school support, but could not afford to provide transportation for the programs. Attendance at the Saturday program was reportedly low, and the principal estimated that "attendance would triple" if transportation were provided.

Eight of the nine rural schools developed PLCs for their staff to provide embedded professional development. A typical PLC is a learning community that has shared values and vision, a collaborative culture, and a focus on examining outcomes to improve student learning.<sup>27</sup> Although it was beyond the scope of this evaluation brief to analyze whether the rural schools' PLCs contained these elements, teachers at five schools described how their schools' small teaching staff influenced their collaboration in PLCs. They noted that their schools did not have enough teachers to form PLCs of teachers who taught the same grades or subjects. Instead, PLCs in those five schools had to be formed across multiple grades and subjects. Teachers from four of these schools indicated that they felt isolated because they did not have an opportunity to collaborate with others teaching the same subject.

### BOX 3. A CASE STUDY OF A HIGH SCHOOL'S RURAL-RELATED CHALLENGES

Dawn High School\* serves fewer than 400 students from a catchment area of more than 600 square miles. According to the principal, the district includes several small towns, and the nearest city is about a 90-minute drive from the school's rural community. The towns the district serves are very small. It is not uncommon for a town to include only 15 people. Students take the bus or drive to school, and the commute can be well over an hour. Although parents at the school described some teachers driving up to 40 miles to get to school, several teachers reported living closer. Respondents reported that the area is largely a farming community.

Respondents at Dawn High School reported that the isolated location of the school and its small towns present several challenges. First, the principal, teachers, and parents said that the school has had difficulty filling leadership and teaching positions. Respondents noted that a number of principals and district administrators had left the district after short tenures, in part due to the isolated nature of the school and the community. The principal noted that it is "hard to attract people to the middle of nowhere," especially when the school's immediate community offers few job opportunities for teachers' spouses.

Second, a district administrator explained that some families live in homes without running water or electricity, and so the school encourages those students to use the school's locker room facilities to bathe and change clothes. However, she went on to say that in a "larger town or city, the resources are more available and you have people around you." She noted that even when rural areas have resources to support families in need, families might not be able to access those resources "because of where they are located and the transportation issues. That's the biggest thing...the isolation."

Third, according to the principal and parents, the long distance between the school and students' homes hinders students' attendance, parents' involvement, and students' participation in extracurricular activities. According to teachers, if students miss the bus, most cannot attend school because they do not have access to private or public transportation. The lack of public and private transportation can also limit parents' involvement in school-based activities. At least two parents in a focus group noted that some parents cannot afford the gas needed for the long drive to school. Two teachers said that students' participation in extracurricular activities is limited due to students' reliance on the school bus; without an after-school bus, most of the students have no other choice but to promptly leave after the school bell rings.

In addition to the geographic isolation, respondents described challenges associated with the school's small size. Two teachers noted that, due to the small teaching staff, they did not have enough colleagues with whom they can collaborate. For example, one teacher said that, although he had the opportunity to work closely with another colleague during the 2011-12 school year, that colleague was not returning the following year. He expressed concern that "I will be the only...teacher [of that subject]. I will feel very much like a one-man island." The school's principal thought that teachers' attitudes also limited collaboration: "It's the closed door, the one-room schoolhouse mentality where everybody is an island to themselves."

To encourage collaboration and improve instruction, the principal has focused on creating small PLCs and using student data. According to respondents, the principal requires teachers to review students' work and data, identify students' needs, and then develop instructional strategies that meet those needs. The principal reported being supported in both these efforts by the state department of education; despite the long drive, state representatives regularly attended weekly PLCs and worked with the school to review and analyze students' data.

*\*All school names in this evaluation brief are pseudonyms, and some details associated with the schools have been obscured to avoid identification.*

An additional requirement of the SIG turnaround and transformation models was principal replacement, although the principal could be retained if he or she had been at the school for fewer than two years. Only one of the nine rural schools replaced its principal in the first year of SIG. However, six had new principals in the second year of SIG. Of these six principals new to their schools in the 2011-12 school year, four moved from a principalship within the district to the SIG school, one had been the school's assistant principal, and one came from outside the district but had been the school's assistant principal several years earlier.



## Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

Theory suggests that teachers play a critical role in the nation's classrooms, and consistent with this theory, empirical research finds that students who have higher-quality teachers (based on value-added scores) are more likely to attend college, earn more, live in wealthier neighborhoods, and save more for retirement.<sup>28</sup> In addition, case studies of schools that have successfully turned around suggest that the schools had a staff committed to the school and its leaders' vision for change.<sup>29</sup> Several federal policy initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind and SIG, have emphasized teachers' roles. For example, SIG regulations required transformation and turnaround schools to implement strategies "that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students."<sup>30</sup> SIG schools adopting the turnaround model were also required to replace at least 50 percent of the teaching staff. Although one of the rural schools was a turnaround school and replaced teaching staff in the first year of the grant, this section focuses on the nine schools' experiences in recruiting and retaining teachers in the second year of the grant.

Although low-performing schools in general can find it difficult to attract and retain the right teachers, features of low-performing rural schools and their communities (such as lower teacher salaries, isolated locations, and lack of adequate housing) can exacerbate rural schools' staffing difficulties.<sup>31</sup> To improve their ability to recruit and retain staff, rural schools and districts can introduce targeted financial incentives to increase the wages of teachers in their schools, strategies to counter teachers' feelings of isolation, and collaborations with teacher preparation programs to identify and recruit teachers, such as grow-your-own programs that recruit local community members to become teachers.<sup>32</sup>

**Respondents from the rural schools reported varying degrees of teacher turnover between the first and second years of SIG.** In response to interview questions about teacher turnover, recruitment, and retention, one principal reported that the school had no difficulty retaining its teaching staff and faced no recruitment challenges. According to respondents from this school, most teachers come from the larger towns near the school. In contrast, principals from two schools reported experiencing more teacher turnover in the second year of SIG than typically expected. Upon receiving the state's designation as a low-performing school, one principal reported that she was required to replace 50 percent of the school's teachers in grades 3 to 6. In the other school, the principal and staff reported that some teachers left because of the district's decision to replace the principal who had led the school in the first year of SIG and that others left because of the long commute to school. One respondent from this school estimated that 40 percent of the staff left after the first year of SIG. When asked about teacher turnover at their schools and whether it affected their schools' improvement efforts, principals and district administrators from the remaining six rural schools described teacher turnover but did not indicate that the level of turnover was unusually high in the second year of SIG.

**Regardless of the rate of teacher turnover, school principals and district administrators from eight rural schools reported at least one factor related to their rural setting that hampered efforts to staff their schools.** The most commonly-reported factor was teacher commutes (six schools). Respondents from these schools noted that long commutes could either dissuade teachers from taking positions or result in teachers leaving after a few years for more conveniently-located positions. (Box 4 describes one of these school's perceived challenges.) For example, principals or district administrators from four schools noted that rising gas prices made it more difficult to retain teachers. One principal said that two teachers had recently left the school because the cost of their hour-long commutes rose to unaffordable levels.

The second most commonly-reported factor (four schools) associated with teacher turnover was the isolated communities, which often meant limited housing and other amenities. For example, one district administrator noted that prospective teachers often do not find the community's available housing acceptable, and a school principal indicated that the school's community offers limited employment opportunities for teachers' spouses. The principal at this school also noted that the recession that began in December 2007 had hit the school's remote community hard and resulted in even scarcer employment opportunities for teachers' spouses, thus increasing the school's recruitment difficulties. In contrast, respondents from two other schools explained that the poor

economy had improved their ability to hire teachers. Because unemployed teachers had fewer job options, they were more likely to accept a position at these rural schools than during better economic times.

District administrators of three rural schools also cited relatively low teacher salaries as hindering their staffing efforts. One district administrator emphasized that the district's salaries were "barely competitive" and, combined with the school's remote location, translated to few applicants for its open positions. An administrator in another rural district mentioned that the district's low rate of pay along with teachers teaching combined classes (because of the school's small size) created additional disincentives for teachers to accept or remain in positions at the school.

**To counteract the perceived undesirability of these rural schools, school and district administrators reported offering at least one type of monetary incentive to attract and retain teachers.** These incentives, funded by SIG, most often included (1) performance-based pay (five schools), (2) compensation for teachers' additional hours worked under SIG (four schools), and (3) signing bonuses (three schools). Teachers did not always collect performance-based pay and bonuses, however. Two of the three schools with signing bonuses in their SIG budgets did pay them to new teachers in the first two years of SIG. According to a district administrator, the third school became ineligible for signing bonuses based on the terms of its SIG because student achievement had improved too much. Of the five schools with performance-based pay, administrators of only one school reported that any of its teachers had met the performance targets necessary to receive additional pay.

Although six of the rural schools paid teachers for extra work hours, the principal or district administrator in four of these schools considered the additional pay to be an actual incentive that encouraged teachers to work at the school. The principals or school administrators in the other two schools did not describe the additional pay as an incentive. For example, the principal and teachers at one of these schools said that despite the extra pay, the extra hours required to teach in the SIG school could nonetheless be a deterrent to keeping and attracting teachers.

Two rural schools reported offering direct support for teacher commutes. One principal noted that there was an existing non-SIG-funded policy to provide gas stipends to teachers working in remote areas of the district. At the second school, the principal and other respondents explained that the district sponsors a van from the cities where teachers live to make teachers' commutes more manageable. A district administrator for another two schools reported that the district was requesting that SIG reimburse teachers for their commuting costs during the third and final year of the grant.

The principals at schools that did not offer monetary incentives reported that they encouraged teachers to stay by creating and maintaining a positive school climate. As one principal explained, money is not the only incentive and that "you have to develop your culture and your school to be something special" for teachers to want to stay. Although he felt that a competitive salary schedule was needed, in the "short term though, you can buy yourself time, create an environment where people feel appreciated...." To encourage teachers to stay, the principal at another school indicated that her main strategy was to strive to create a better working environment for teachers. For example, she shows her appreciation by recognizing their accomplishments, considering their teaching assignment preferences, and supporting welcome-back-to-school and holiday festivities.

In addition to monetary benefits, district or school administrators from two rural schools reported that they had reached out to teacher preparation schools to encourage new teachers to consider the school for a possible position. One principal reported that the partnership resulted in interns, who could then see that the school "is not as bad" as its location and reputation suggest. However, none of the respondents in the nine rural schools indicated that they had initiated "grow-your-own" programs with local teacher preparation schools.

#### BOX 4. A CASE STUDY OF A HIGH SCHOOL'S EXPERIENCES RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS

Big Hill High School is located in a small, isolated, low-income community. Multiple respondents, including the principal and district administrators, described the school's prior difficulties building a qualified staff as a key performance problem. Two factors were viewed as contributing to the problem: the school's remote location and the placement of low-performing teachers from other district schools. According to several respondents, most teachers commute more than 45 minutes to the school from more affluent and less isolated surrounding communities. An external support provider said, "It's a long way out here from any part of civilization," and the principal commented that "the drive is brutal at times." Multiple respondents, including the principal, district administrators, and teachers, reported that the school had a history of taking on teachers, often through involuntary transfers, who had not been successful in their previous positions. They also said that, in the second year of SIG, the school continued to receive involuntarily-transferred staff, including one transfer who was described as "toxic" and "a horrible fit" for what the school was trying to achieve.

Big Hill High School replaced 50 percent of its teachers in the first year, in accordance with its implementation of the turnaround model. According to administrators, in the first year of SIG the turnaround model gave the school the opportunity to remove teachers who were identified as low-performing or without the appropriate certification. The principal reported that many of the new staff came from outside of the district. Before accepting the positions, they were brought to the school to see firsthand its remote setting. A strategy that helped to recruit and retain these teachers was additional pay provided through SIG: Big Hill High School teachers earn more than 15 percent above what teachers in other district schools receive, reflecting the extra hours they are asked to teach in the classroom. The district also sponsors a van from the cities where teachers live to the school to make the length and cost of teachers' commutes more manageable.

### Increasing Parent Involvement

Parents' involvement in their children's schooling can be an important component of a school's improvement efforts. For example, correlational studies have found a significant association between parents' involvement and positive student outcomes<sup>33</sup> and that efforts to strengthen parents' involvement are frequently a component of successful school improvement efforts.<sup>34</sup> The SIG requirement that districts of transformation schools "provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement" reflects this view that parents can play an important role in their children's schooling.<sup>35</sup> (See Box 1 for the SIG model requirements.)

Although low-income parents in both rural and nonrural schools have been found to be less engaged in school activities than higher-income parents,<sup>36</sup> particular characteristics of rural schools and their communities can influence parents' involvement in different ways. For example, the small size of a rural community and the central role of its school can encourage parents' involvement in children's learning both at school and at home.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the distance between students' homes and the schools and a lack of public transportation can hinder parents' participation in school-based activities.

**Respondents from seven of the nine rural schools indicated that parents' involvement was low and hindered their efforts to improve students' performance.** During site visits, respondents at these seven schools most often focused on parents' involvement in school-based activities, rather than on other types of parental engagement in their children's learning (such as helping with schoolwork at home).<sup>38</sup> For example, the principal, parent liaison, and one teacher from an elementary school noted that parents' involvement has been "historically low" and "continues to be low."<sup>39</sup> The teacher said that "parents don't show up for parent-teacher conferences" and never volunteer in her classroom. On average, 70 percent of teacher survey respondents in these seven schools indicated that "insufficient parent involvement" posed a moderate or major challenge for improving the school.

In contrast, respondents from the eighth rural school reported strong parental involvement; multiple respondents, including teachers and coaches, described the level of parents' involvement as "high" or "a strength." For example, one teacher commented on the good parental attendance at teacher conferences and report card pick-up events, facilitated by the school's proximity to students' homes. Despite the multiple comments from respondents about their perceptions of strong parental involvement, teachers' responses to the

survey suggested that involving parents in school activities was still a challenge. At this school, 47 percent of the teacher survey respondents reported that “insufficient parent involvement” posed a moderate or major challenge to improving students’ performance. Although nearly half of the staff reported this as a challenge, it is still the lowest percentage among the rural schools. (Appendix C provides teachers’ survey responses for each school.)

Staff perceptions regarding parents’ involvement at the ninth rural school were conflicting. Although 95 percent of the school’s teacher survey respondents reported that “insufficient parent involvement” posed a moderate or major challenge to improving performance, site visit respondents had mixed perceptions. Nearly all site visit respondents mentioned the positive participation of parents on the school site council and parent-teacher conferences. However, respondents also described parents’ participation in a school committee charged with increasing families’ involvement in the school as “weak.”

**Respondents across the nine rural schools described multiple challenges to involving parents in school activities.**

The most commonly-noted challenges, as perceived by site visit respondents, were parents’ work schedules (seven schools), parents not valuing education (five schools), lack of access to transportation (five schools), parental beliefs that education is the school’s responsibility (three schools), and distance between home and school (three schools).<sup>40</sup> For example, respondents in four schools felt that parents often held more than one job and were probably too busy to be involved in school-based activities. A teacher in one school noted, “We are talking about parents that work 60 hours a week...more than one job. They drive right by [the school], but they don’t turn in.” Respondents, including parents,<sup>41</sup> perceived some parents as not sufficiently valuing education to become involved at the school or in their children’s education. A teacher in one school felt that “[students] have nobody at home that cares about their grades, and therefore eventually for some of them that rubs off on them....” In general, these perceived challenges to high parental involvement are similar to those reported by staff at low-income urban schools.<sup>42</sup>

Site visit respondents mentioned two factors related to their schools’ location: distance and lack of transportation. One district administrator noted that parents “are looking at probably 45 miles of straight driving” to attend school-based events and the lack of parents’ involvement at the school is “a big issue.” A principal from another school described that the current school building was purposefully built in the center of the district and is now not near students’ homes. As a result, the school “lost that community school sense because everybody has to drive to get here. Transportation is tough.” Another principal mentioned that “very few people have their own transportation,” limiting parents’ access to the school.

In the three rural high schools that identified transportation barriers as potentially limiting parents’ involvement, several respondents in each school noted that parents *did* attend the school’s sporting events. A teacher from one of these schools initially reported that transportation was an obstacle but then stated, “But my goodness, they seem able to get everywhere else,” including athletic events. Similarly, the principal at one of the other schools, who noted the lack of transportation, said that parents do come to athletic events, which he called “the one unif[ying] force in the community.” Several teachers at the third high school noted that they took it upon themselves to attend the school’s football and basketball games to connect with their students’ parents.

**Respondents at four of the nine rural schools reported that increasing parents’ involvement is a focus of their schools’ improvement actions, but did not report special efforts to counter challenges associated with their rural location.** Respondents at these schools, which included three schools perceived by staff as having low parental involvement and the one school perceived as having high parental involvement, discussed their schools’ goals for increasing parents’ involvement and related actions, including hiring or expanding the role of a parent liaison using SIG funds. (Appendix D describes our process for determining whether parents’ involvement was a focus of each school’s improvement strategies.) Respondents at one school noted that the principal and parent liaison, whose position was funded by SIG, sought to (1) improve the school’s physical appearance, in part to be more welcoming to parents; and (2) increase the number of activities for parents (such as holding separate events for mothers and fathers, at which they have breakfast and take time to read to the children). At another school, the parent liaison position was increased from part- to full-time, and respondents described many activities

offered to parents, including morning English classes, parent workshops, family activities such as math and literacy nights, and volunteer opportunities. The parent liaison at this school also translates every communication from the school into Spanish and is available to assist parents who come to the school during the day. Parents from this school reported receiving letters in multiple languages, telephone calls, and home visits. (Box 5 describes another school's focus on addressing its perceived challenges involving parents.)

Respondents at three other rural schools reported that although increasing parent involvement was not a focus of their schools' improvement actions, their schools did provide opportunities (such as family nights) for parents to be involved in the school. Respondents at one school reported that the school was rolling out a new model of parental involvement, which requires teachers to put together a portfolio of data on each child to share with parents and to have data about the whole class available online for parents.

Despite reporting low parental involvement, respondents at the two remaining rural schools did not indicate that increasing parents' involvement was a focus of their schools' improvement actions and did not describe any formal actions to increase parents' involvement at school or in their children's learning at home.

### **BOX 5. A CASE STUDY OF A RURAL SCHOOL'S PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT EXPERIENCES**

Respondents at Blue Blossom High School uniformly perceived parents' involvement in the school as low and increasing parents' involvement as challenging. According to the teacher survey, 68 percent of responding teachers rated "insufficient parent involvement" as a moderate or major challenge to improving students' performance. The principal, parent liaison, and teachers described several obstacles that they felt affected parents' involvement, including parents' lack of concern about school, parents' work schedules conflicting with school events, and parents' limited access to cars or public transportation.

According to four respondents, including members of the school's improvement team, increasing parents' involvement is a school priority. Two teachers and other members of the school improvement team reported that the SIG-funded parent liaison position had improved the school's visibility and interactions with parents in the second year of SIG. The liaison highlighted being responsible for an ongoing effort of the school to host community breakfasts to try to engage more parents and community members in school activities and issuing a monthly parent/community newsletter. One parent said that the liaison is "that constant reminder...that in order to make [school] work, you need to be involved as a parent."

One school staff person said that the school is "real big on parental contact, real big on guardian contact." To further attract parents to PTA open houses and end-of-course celebrations, the school provided food and distributed report cards at these events (instead of sending them home with students). Teachers mentioned that the school also instituted a policy in the 2011-12 school year that required all teachers to contact the parents or guardians of five of their students each week. At least one of the contacts had to be positive. According to teachers, telephoning parents was the most frequent form of contact. Multiple teachers credited this practice (contacting parents for positive reasons and contacting parents more frequently) with improving parental communications.

## **Conclusion**

In this focused look at nine rural schools receiving SIG, we examined how rural schools' context—specifically, their distance from large population centers, geographic spread and low population density, and small community size—can influence the challenges they face and the improvement actions they implement to address a history of low performance. We focused on how the schools' locations shaped the experiences of the nine rural schools in recruiting and retaining teachers and increasing parents' involvement.

As of the second year of SIG (when the site visit and teacher survey data for this evaluation brief were collected), respondents from eight rural schools reported challenges related to recruiting and retaining their teaching staff, and seven schools reported low parental involvement. In both instances, the distance from parents' or teachers' homes to the schools was an important factor. For example, respondents in six schools reported that

current or prospective teachers' commutes affected their schools' ability to recruit or retain teachers, and respondents in three schools reported that distance between parents' homes and the school hindered parents' participation in academic school activities. In several schools, these long commutes appeared to reflect prospective teachers' unwillingness to locate to the rural school community. Other factors having no clear relationship to the schools' rural location, such as parents' work schedules and lack of concern or value for education, were also perceived by some respondents as limiting parents' involvement.

Although respondents at the rural schools cited actions to address these and other performance problems, they did not report many actions specifically designed to address challenges to school improvement related to their rural location. For example, of the six schools where principals reported that teachers' commutes posed challenges to recruiting and retaining teachers, only two offered financial support for their commutes. Of the seven schools where staff perceived parents' involvement as low, only four reported that parents' involvement was one of their schools' overall improvement goals. These respondents reported that their schools mostly increased the role of their parent liaisons to address the problem.

Findings from this evaluation brief indicate that rural SIG schools' turnaround efforts could be hindered by their remote location and large geographic catchment areas. Although leaders of rural schools, like leaders of other SIG schools, might generally struggle to attract teachers to schools that have a history of low performance and serve disadvantaged populations, they additionally have to address teachers' long commutes and feelings of isolation. Similarly, rural school leaders might have to find ways to overcome parents' limited transportation options to encourage their participation in school-based activities. Lacking a larger sample of schools and more objective measures of the success and sustainability of these improvement strategies, this evaluation brief simply offers descriptive information for other schools in similar situations to consider. Future reports describing the Study of School Turnaround's examination of a larger sample of SIG schools' turnaround efforts may provide additional insights into the topics covered by this evaluation brief, as well as the schools' prospects for sustaining activities implemented during the first two years of the grant.



## Appendix A

### Data Collection and Analytic Methods

The Study of School Turnaround is a set of case studies examining the school improvement process in a diverse sample of schools receiving funds from the SIG program. For three years starting in 2010-11, this study has been documenting the change process in a purposive sample of 35 schools from a variety of state and local contexts. It is designed to describe the characteristics of these SIG schools, the decisions and strategies the schools and their school districts undertake (and why), and the challenges they face as they attempt to improve school performance.

The study includes three overlapping subsamples drawn from the sample of 35 schools: (1) a “core” group of 25 schools, (2) 11 schools with a high proportion of English language learners (ELLs), and (3) 9 schools in rural settings. This evaluation brief focuses on the nine rural schools, which were purposively selected to include schools with a rural designation in 2009-10 according to the urban-centric locale code in the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data. The sample includes five high schools and four elementary schools from eight districts and four states.

Data collection for the Study of School Turnaround has relied on two data sources: (1) site visits to the schools and (2) a teacher survey. This evaluation brief uses data from site visits to the rural schools and the survey of teachers in those schools, both of which were conducted in spring 2012.

### Site Visits

The site visits, which lasted about two days each, took place in the nine rural schools from March through May of 2012. Two researchers from the study team visited each school, with one conducting the interviews and the other taking notes. With the permission of respondents, conversations were also audio-recorded. All but 4 of the 116 rural interviews and focus groups were recorded.

The study team conducted one-on-one interviews with district administrators, principals, coaches, teachers, and parent liaisons, and focus groups with School Improvement Team members, teachers, parents, and students.<sup>1</sup> Respondents were selected in coordination with district and school personnel to solicit a variety of perspectives on the schools’ history and current change strategy. In other words, respondents were not randomly selected, so it should not be assumed that their perceptions are necessarily representative of their entire respondent groups.

Interviewers followed semi-structured interview protocols that provided key questions for interviewees and critical probes to ask if necessary. However, to build rapport with school staff, the interview structure allowed for conversation and discussion. Interviewers also remained flexible to follow up on themes that emerged during interviews that they felt warranted more attention. Interviewers sought to collect respondents’ input on the topics on which they were most knowledgeable, as well as their perspectives on key issues identified by the study team in advance. Discussion topics included: (1) the overall change process in each school, including key challenges to school improvement, the actions being implemented, and how the school’s rural setting contributed to these challenges or influenced improvement actions; and (2) the schools’ experiences related to increasing parental involvement and recruiting and retaining teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Only high school students were interviewed. Given that not every rural school was a high school, we excluded students as a respondent group in our analysis of rural schools’ focus on improving parents’ involvement (see Appendix D). We did review high school student interview data to help inform our understanding of the rural context, such as student reports on where they live relative to school and how they travel to school, but overall student responses were not a major source of data for this evaluation brief.

It is important to note that this evaluation brief encompasses a study of *low-performing SIG schools* that are located in rural areas, as opposed to a study of *rural schools*. Our primary aim is thus similar across the “core,” ELL, and rural samples: to learn about the improvement process in these low-performing schools. So we used a similar battery of questions across the three samples that covered general topics of interest, such as perceptions of performance problems, improvement strategies, challenges to improvement, and leadership. We wanted to provide all respondents with an open opportunity to share their views on these issues related to school improvement more generally and not force them in a particular direction with narrower, rural-specific questions. Nevertheless, because we hypothesized that the schools’ rural context could be relevant, we did include some rural-focused probes in our protocols. Two examples from the interview protocols are provided below to illustrate our approach of maintaining questions about the general improvement process while adding probes that we hypothesized as being relevant for our particular sample (in this case, the rural sample):

**What is your understanding of why this school has remained low-performing year after year? What has hindered improvement efforts in the past (prior to receiving SIG funds)?**

*Probe if not mentioned:*

- To what extent would you attribute the school’s history of low performance to its setting [urban/inner city, rural/isolated, etc.]?

**I’d like to turn to ask a few questions about your teaching staff. What have been the school’s recent experiences attracting/recruiting qualified staff? Has this changed since last year? If so, how? Why or why not?**

*Probe if not mentioned:*

- Is the school able to attract qualified—i.e., skilled and motivated—teachers to the school? Why or why not?
- What factors contribute to these experiences— school reputation, school location, pay scale, other?
- Where do most teachers live relative to school?
- Are any incentives provided to attract teachers to the school? If so, please describe.

This evaluation brief drew on interviews and focus groups from a total of 244 respondents across the 116 interviews and focus groups, as follows:

- 5 district SIG directors
- 3 superintendents
- 21 district-level staff
- 9 principals
- 73 teachers (individually interviewed and focus group participants)
- 12 instructional coaches
- 46 school staff of the School Improvement Team<sup>2</sup>
- 6 external providers (6 schools worked with external providers)
- 34 parents<sup>3</sup>
- 35 students (from five high schools)

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<sup>2</sup> Note that these 46 School Improvement Team members included assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers. In these discussions, the respondents were interviewed and asked to talk about their role on the School Improvement Team.

<sup>3</sup> The number of parents participating varied across schools. The school staff recruited parents to participate in our discussions. Thus, these parents were likely those who were already more involved in the school than other parents. It should not be assumed that their perceptions are necessarily representative of all parents at the school.

Audio-recorded interviews and focus group notes were transcribed to “near-verbatim” quality. The interview and focus group notes were reviewed by the senior site visitor and were revised until they met the quality standards established for the study team. That is, senior staff reviewed the notes to ensure they were very close to a transcription, explained acronyms, identified the role of individuals described in the interviews and focus groups, and included consistent background information about each data collection activity.

The qualitative site visit data were analyzed using the following five-stage process (for more detailed information on the process, please see Le Floch et al. [forthcoming]):

**Stage 1—Preliminary Data Capture.** Shortly after each site visit, researchers entered descriptive information about the visit (e.g., number of completed interviews, data collection challenges, a description of school context) into a web-based preliminary data repository.

**Stage 2—Developing and Piloting Codes.** The coding scheme for the rural school interviews resembled the scheme used for the study’s initial year of data collection (school year 2010-11), which was based on: (1) key components of the study’s conceptual framework, (2) regulatory requirements of SIG-funded schools, and (3) topics that were mentioned by respondents and described in the preliminary data capture (see Le Floch et al. [forthcoming] for the detailed code book and conceptual framework). The coding team revised the first-year code book to reduce and refine the total number of codes and to address concepts that were a focus of the year 2 data collection. These codes were pilot tested and refined. For this evaluation brief, we used the same code book and the same coding structure as the larger project, but the analysis focused on several key codes, including those related to school challenges, staffing, staff capacity, parent involvement, and location.

**Stage 3—Coding.** All site visit data (interviews and focus groups) were formally coded using *Atlas.ti*®, a well-known qualitative software program. The coding stage was a multistep process that included training, weekly assessments of interrater agreement, frequent debriefing, and review of coded data by senior staff.

**Stage 4—Data Repository.** Analysts used the coded data to enter school-specific data in a web-based, password-protected data repository in the password-protected web-based platform. The data repository consisted of open- and closed-ended questions for which analysts summarized the data for each school.

**Stage 5—Analysis.** Analysts conducted cross-case analyses and categorized the schools along topics of interest based on the repository data in conjunction with the transcribed interviews. All data on school practices are based on respondents’ self-reports and reflect no external assessment of the quality of those practices. To examine the prevalence of particular issues across schools in the sample, analysts generated simple counts (such as the number of schools where respondents reported a specific practice, contextual feature, or challenge). To produce such counts, they applied explicit decision rules (for example, indicating the number or type of respondents who provided data on the topic). Throughout this evaluation brief, we define the decision rules used for particular analyses. Appendices B and D outline the decision rules for our more complex school classifications. When case study respondents reported divergent views, we note those differences in the text. When reporting information provided by only one respondent group (for example, principals or teachers), the respondent group is identified as the source of that information. We use the general term *respondents* when reporting information provided by more than one respondent group.

Throughout this evaluation brief, we incorporate direct quotations from study respondents as they enhance the clarity and relevance of the study, which is based largely on qualitative data. These data uniquely provide detailed, contextual information that can convey meaning through illustrative examples. Quotations were purposively selected to enrich the findings arrived at through systematic, carefully-documented analyses. These quotations are not representative of all quotations in our data, and they are meant only to enrich a particular finding, not to formally justify it.

## Teacher Survey

To complement the site visits, which included qualitative interviews and focus groups with just a handful of purposively-selected teachers, all teachers in each school were invited in spring 2012 to complete a 10-minute survey. The survey was administered from April 6 through July 3, 2012 in web-based and hard-copy formats, with a total of 225 teacher responses in the nine rural schools. The average response rate was 79 percent and ranged from 65 to 92 percent in each school. There were no monetary incentives provided for participation in the survey.

The survey was also administered to teachers in the Study of School Turnaround's core and ELL subsamples, so it included items related to the research questions for those components of the study. This approach enabled us to administer a single, uniform survey to all schools, rather than having to administer multiple surveys for schools in multiple subsamples. It also provided the flexibility to compare responses across subsamples if desired. The full survey instrument was developed from surveys administered in other studies and used items with reliable scales. (For more information, please see Le Floch et al. [forthcoming].) It included 23 questions and asked teachers to respond to topics such as school roles and experiences, school climate and culture, school improvement efforts, and perceived challenges with the school and teaching environment.

Given the narrow focus of this evaluation brief, we used the teacher survey primarily to identify teachers' reports of challenges in the schools' efforts to improve students' performance (see below for the full text of the main survey question used in this evaluation brief).

**Question 11. How much of a challenge is each of the following to your efforts to improve student performance? Response options are: Not a challenge, Minor challenge, Moderate challenge, or Major challenge. (Check one response in each row.)**

- a. Large class size and/or case load
- b. Lack of safety in or around the school
- c. Inadequate or substandard facilities
- d. Inadequate supports for the lowest-achieving students
- e. Too few textbooks and other instructional materials
- f. Textbooks and instructional materials that are not aligned with state standards
- g. Poor student discipline
- h. Insufficient parent involvement
- i. Large number of student transfers into this school or your class at various points during the year
- j. Low student motivation
- k. Low staff morale
- l. Low teacher expectations for student achievement
- m. Low and/or erratic student attendance
- n. Insufficient access to technology
- o. Other (please specify)

The complete Study of School Turnaround Spring 2012 Teacher Survey and protocols can be found at <http://www.air.org/topic/education/study-of-school-turnaround-rural-protocol-survey>.

## Appendix B

### Analytic Approach for Categorizing Rural Schools

This analysis describes the nine rural schools along a continuum of distance from and influence by urban centers and metropolitan areas using publicly-available data.

#### Data Sources

- **School's urban-centric locale code from the 2010-11 Common Core of Data (CCD).** This classification system was developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to describe the proximity of a school's address to an urbanized area (that is, a densely-populated core area and surrounding areas). There are four main classifications: (1) city, (2) suburb, (3) town, and (4) rural. Each of these has three subcategories. For city and suburb locales, the subcategories provide detail on population size. For rural and town locales, the subcategories provide further detail on distance to an urban area, with *fringe* being the least distant and *remote* the most distant. ([http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural\\_locales.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp))
- **School's district-level urban-centric locale code from the 2010-11 CCD.** The same urban-centric locale code classifications and subcategories described for schools apply to districts. However, a district's locale code is not determined by its address, but rather the locale codes of its schools. If 50 percent or more of a district's students are in schools with the same locale code, the district is assigned that locale code. Otherwise, the major locale code classification with the highest percentage of students is assigned to the district (such as suburb or rural). ([http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural\\_locales.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp))
- **School's county-level 2004 urban influence code from the Economic Research Service (ERS) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).** These 12 codes are based upon county-level metropolitan and nonmetropolitan designations by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and classify counties by their population and commuting data gathered from the Census of Population. A county with the most urban influence would be a metropolitan area with one million or more residents, and the county with the least urban influence would be a noncore area that is not adjacent to a metropolitan or micropolitan area and does not contain a town of at least 2,500 residents. (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/urban-influence-codes.aspx>)
- **School's county-level 2003 rural–urban continuum code from ERS at USDA.** Also based on county-level metropolitan and nonmetropolitan designations by OMB, these nine codes describe metropolitan counties by the population size of the metropolitan area in which they are located, and nonmetropolitan counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metropolitan area. Similar to the urban influence code, metropolitan counties with one million or more residents are the most urban, whereas the most rural are those nonmetropolitan counties that are not adjacent to a metropolitan area and are defined as completely rural (or have fewer than 2,500 residents in any population area). (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation.aspx>)

#### Stage 1: Assigning Codes to Schools

For each rural school, analysts assigned a code for each measure described above.

1. **School's urban-centric locale code.** Instead of using the numeric codes designated in the CCD, we assigned values 1 through 12 to each code, with 1 being city, large (11 in the CCD) and 12 being rural, remote (43 in the CCD). Therefore, the study's codes for the three rural CCD codes were rural, fringe (10); rural, distant (11); and rural, remote (12).

2. **School’s district-level urban-centric locale code.** Using the same approach described for the urban-centric locale code for schools, we assigned each district its appropriate designation. All districts but one were rural.
3. **School’s county-level urban influence code.** We used the codes from 1 to 12 that ERS assigns to each county. A designation of 1 is equal to the most urban influence, and a designation of 12 is equal to the least urban influence.
4. **School’s county-level rural–urban continuum code.** We used the codes from 1 to 9 that ERS assigns to each county. A designation of 1 is equal to the most urban along the continuum, and a designation of 9 is equal to the most rural.

## Stage 2: Categorizing Schools into the Three Groups

Analysts then summed the values across all four classification schemes to create a final score for each school. The summary scores for the nine schools range from 19 to 34, a 16-point spread. The highest score of 34 designates the most remote rural school with the least urban influence, while the lowest score of 19 designates the least remote rural school with the most urban influence. Separating the 16-point spread into quartiles, the most remote rural schools were designated as having summary scores from 31 to 34, schools in the middle two quartiles were designated as having summary scores from 27 to 30 or 23 to 26, and the least remote rural schools were designated as having summary scores from 19 to 22. We then combined the middle two quartiles to create three groupings: (1) Most Remote, Least Urban Influence; (2) Moderately Remote, Some Urban Influence; and (3) Least Remote, Most Urban Influence.

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>Most Remote with the Least Urban Influence</i>	The three schools in this category had an overall rating of 31 or higher.
<i>Moderately Remote with Some Urban Influence</i>	The four schools in this category had an overall rating of 23 to 30 (representing the two middle quartiles).
<i>Least Remote with the Most Urban Influence</i>	The two schools in this category had an overall rating of 22 or less.

## Caveats

These scores are based only on data from NCES, OMB, and ERS and do not reflect the perceptions of residents or site visitors, who might find the schools, districts, and counties more or less remote and with a different degree of urban influence than these summary scores and groupings indicate.



## Appendix C

### Percentage of Teachers, by School, Who Reported the Following Challenges as “Moderate or Major” Challenges to Improving Students’ Performance

<i>Type of Challenge</i>	<i>Gorge HS</i>	<i>Dawn HS</i>	<i>Blue Blossom HS</i>	<i>Green Birch ES</i>	<i>Broadscape ES</i>	<i>Big Hill HS</i>	<i>Steppe HS</i>	<i>Bubbling Brook ES</i>	<i>Powder Mountain ES</i>
Insufficient Parent Involvement	73	75	68	47	55	95	63	68	78
Low Student Motivation	76	75	68	31	64	62	85	58	78
Low and/or Erratic Student Attendance	68	67	43	23	45	29	74	21	41
Low Staff Morale	53	79	30	63	18	26	48	37	13
Poor Student Discipline	51	38	44	17	36	33	52	39	44
Inadequate or Substandard Facilities	25	4	39	13	9	65	0	11	6
Inadequate Supports for the Lowest-Achieving Students	40	46	34	30	73	52	15	58	28
Too Few Textbooks and Other Instructional Materials	53	38	53	23	18	20	33	6	11
Textbooks and Instructional Materials That Are Not Aligned with State Standards	22	33	38	23	18	5	4	11	11
Large Number of Student Transfers into This School or Your Class at Various Points During the Year	63	79	23	27	18	33	22	26	11
Low Teacher Expectations for Student Achievement	31	29	20	13	9	10	19	6	6
Large Class Size and/or Case Load	55	61	56	27	36	30	42	29	50
Lack of Safety in or around the School	12	17	29	10	9	29	11	11	13
Insufficient Access to Technology	61	8	32	10	9	80	15	5	17

Source: SST teacher survey, spring 2012.

Note: All school names in this evaluation brief are pseudonyms. HS = high school, ES = elementary school.

## Appendix D

### Analytic Approach for Assessing School Focus on Increasing Parents' Involvement

This analysis examines perceptions of how much parental involvement is a priority or a focus of schools' improvement strategies.

#### Data Sources

- **Interviews with principals, teachers, and instructional coaches** included the following questions to elicit responses on parents' involvement in activities at school. (Note that information could also have been obtained through other points in the interview, not only in direct response to the following questions.)

##### Principal, teacher, or instructional coach

- I'd like to follow up on our previous conversation in the fall when you mentioned that your primary goals for this school were *[school's specific goals were mentioned by interviewer]*. Are these still your primary goals? Have they changed at all during this school year? How? Why or why not?
- In our previous conversation you also mentioned the key improvement strategies you are implementing: *[insert strategies here]*. To what extent have these strategies changed during this school year? If so, how? Why or why not?

- **Focus groups with teachers and parents** included the following questions to elicit responses on the level of parents' involvement and how parents are involved in the school. (Information could also have been obtained through other points in the focus group, not only in direct response to the following questions.)

##### Teacher

- What are the main ways in which the school is working to accomplish its goals *[including parental involvement]*? What specific activities are being implemented?

##### Parent

- Are you aware of any activities or programs that the school has in place to get parents and the community more involved at the school? If so, please describe.
- Let's talk about the involvement of other parents and community members. What sorts of meetings or events do other parents and community members most often attend? Why these events?
- Let's talk about your involvement at the school. What types of meetings or events do you attend? How frequently?

#### Stage 1: Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

Each of the interviews and focus groups was transcribed and coded. Using the coded data, the site lead for each school answered questions in the repository that captured the extent to which the school focused on increasing parents' involvement:

- What is the school doing to overcome the challenges to parents' involvement? Are any of these efforts new in the past one or two years? Do stakeholders at the school believe their efforts to encourage parental involvement are successful? Why or why not? Provide evidence and note how many and what type of respondents.

- If increasing parents’ involvement is described as challenging by stakeholders and the school is not engaged in any efforts to increase involvement, why is this the case? Describe what stakeholders/respondents say and include site visitors’ observations as appropriate.

After the first site visitor completed the data repository for his or her school(s), the second site visitor reviewed the responses to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the entries.

## Stage 2: School Classification Procedures

Based on the repository responses, analysts categorized schools using the classification scheme described below, capturing whether increasing parents’ involvement was a focus of the schools’ improvement strategies. When the classifications were complete, the site lead for each school reviewed and verified the categorizations for his or her school(s). If there was a disagreement, the analysts and site lead returned to the coded data for the school(s) in question to resolve the disagreement.

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>Increasing parents’ involvement appears to be a focus of the school’s improvement strategies.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The principal or at least two other respondents reported that increasing parents’ involvement was a part of the school’s improvement strategies, a goal of the school, or a priority.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The principal or at least two other respondents noted strategies (for example, hiring a parent liaison or training staff on how to be more welcoming to parents) that the school was implementing to increase parents’ involvement.</li> </ul>
<i>Increasing parents’ involvement does not appear to be a focus of the school’s improvement strategies, but the school has implemented formal strategies to increase parents’ involvement.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least one of the following applies:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Only one respondent or no respondents reported that increasing parents’ involvement was part of the school’s improvement strategies, a goal of the school, or a priority.</li> <li>○ The principal or at least two other respondents noted that increasing parents’ involvement was <i>not</i> part of the school’s improvement strategies, a goal of the school, or a priority.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The principal or at least two other respondents noted strategies that the school was implementing to increase parents’ involvement.</li> </ul>

Classification	Definition
<p><i>Increasing parents' involvement does not appear to be a focus of the school's improvement strategies, and the school has not implemented formal strategies to increase parents' involvement.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least one of the following applies:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Only one respondent or no respondents reported that increasing parents' involvement was part of the school's improvement strategies, a goal of the school, or a priority.</li> <li>○ The principal or at least two other respondents noted that increasing parents' involvement was <i>not</i> part of the school's improvement strategies, a goal of the school, or a priority.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No respondents noted strategies that the school was implementing to increase parents' involvement.</li> </ul>

## Caveats

These school-level classifications are not based on objective, quantitative indicators of the level of parents' involvement at the school, but rather are based on the reports of interview and focus group participants.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> American Youth Policy Forum (2010). *Challenges, assets, and innovations: Considerations for secondary education in rural communities*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 15, 2012 from <http://www.aypf.org/tripreports/2010/documents/AYPF%20Rural%20Education%20Brief.pdf>.; Redding, S., & Walberg, H.J. (2012). *Promoting learning in rural schools*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service (2010). *Evaluation of the Implementation of the Rural and Low-Income Schools (RLIS) Program: Final Report*, Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2010). *Final requirements for School Improvement Grants authorized under Section 1003(g) of Title I of the ESEA*. *Federal Register*, 75(208).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2011). *An overview of school turnaround*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved September 26, 2012 from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigoverviewppt.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> The three tiers of SIG eligibility are defined as follows: (1) a Tier I school is a Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that is either (a) among a state's lowest-achieving 5 percent or the lowest-achieving 5 schools (whichever is greater) or (b) a high school with a graduation rate below 60 percent over a number of years; (2) a Tier II school is a secondary school that is eligible for but does not receive Title I, Part A funds, and meets the performance criteria for a Tier I school; and (3) a Tier III school is a Title I school in improvement, correction action, or restructuring that is not included in Tier I.

<sup>11</sup> American Youth Policy Forum (2010). *Challenges, assets, and innovations: Considerations for secondary education in rural communities*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 15, 2012 from <http://www.aypf.org/tripreports/2010/documents/AYPF%20Rural%20Education%20Brief.pdf>.; Bell, S., & Pirtle, S.S. (2012). *Transforming low-performing rural schools*. Austin, TX: Texas Comprehensive Center at Southwest Educational Development Consortium. Retrieved November 15, 2012 from [http://txcc.sedl.org/resources/briefs/number\\_10/](http://txcc.sedl.org/resources/briefs/number_10/).; Corbett, J. (2011). *Lead turnaround partners: How the emerging marketplace of lead turnaround partners is changing school improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved September 15, 2012 from <http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/LeadPartners.pdf>.

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<sup>38</sup> Epstein, J.L. (2010). Caring connections: Linking research and practice can improve programs of family and community involvement and lead to improved student success in school. *Kappan Classic*, 92(3), 81-96. Epstein asserts that there are six types of parent involvement: (1) parenting that establishes home environments that support children as students; (2) communicating school-to-home and home-to-school about school programs and children's progress; (3) parents volunteering at the school; (4) learning at home by parents helping their children with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning; (5) involving parents in school decision making; and (6) collaborating with the community to identify and integrate resources and services to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

<sup>39</sup> If site visit respondents in at least two respondent groups (for example, principal, teachers, coaches, or parents) and at least three respondents across these groups used terms such as *low* or *lacking* to describe parents' involvement, we considered the school to have low parental involvement. Similarly, if respondents used terms such as *high* or *a strength*, we considered the school to have high parental involvement. Because findings are based on respondents' perceptions and not on a standard definition of *low* or *high*, it is possible that one school with reportedly-low parental involvement could have higher actual parental participation in activities than another school with reportedly-high parental involvement.

<sup>40</sup> For a school to be included in these counts, respondents from at least two different respondent groups had to mention the factor.

<sup>41</sup> Given that the number of parents participating in the focus group varied across schools and that parents recruited for our discussions were likely those parents most involved in the school (and so may not be typical of all parents at the school), we used data from these focus groups only to provide additional context to other respondents' perceptions.

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