TEXAS COMPREHENSIVE CENTER
Briefing Paper

# Transforming Low-Performing Rural Schools

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## Summary

Rural educational issues cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, but current research offers some solutions and insights into turning around low-performing rural districts and schools. Of the four possibilities set forth by the U.S. Department of Education, the transformation model holds the most promise for rural schools. Successful transformation is often attributed to thoughtful and flexible school leadership and staff actions that integrate a community's unique qualities into the change process.

## Key Points

- There is no proven, universal school improvement approach for improving low-performing schools in rural districts.
- Transformation in such areas requires innovation that integrates the existing values, norms, and culture found in the context of the community and district organization.
- The transformation process should be systemic and incorporate a coherent, collaborative approach that includes stakeholder input in all phases of the change effort.

## Introduction

Implementing school reform is often thought of by the public as applicable in urban rather than rural school settings (Ayers, 2012). However, the rural student population is growing and has been largely ignored by policymakers when planning for improving low-performing schools (Ayers). Rural school and district transformation can be influenced both positively and negatively by contextual factors found in such locations (Carlson, Thorn, Mulvenon, Turner, & Hughes, 2002). However, rural settings offer many unique resources that can be leveraged to promote the transformation of low-performing schools (Redding & Walberg, 2012). This brief examines how districts and schools can integrate the unique attributes and resources found in rural communities into school improvement efforts to promote the transformation of low-performing schools.

## Definition of Rural Districts and Schools

There are multiple determinations of what is considered "rural." The National Center for Education Statistics uses locale codes in its Common Core of Data to delineate among urban, suburban, and rural districts and schools. Beginning in 2006–07, the Urban-Centric locale codes replaced the older Metro-Centric codes. Under the new designations the following definitions for rural are used:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Rural, Fringe** | Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster |
| **Rural, Distant** | Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster |
| **Rural, Remote** | Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster |

(National Center for Education Sciences, 2006)

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, or Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), provides a definition of rural for use in grant funding under Title VI. This definition also references parameters provided by the U.S. Census to determine whether an area or territory is considered to be rural. Title VI of the NCLB/ESEA provides for funding to small, rural districts to promote student achievement under the Rural Education Initiative (No Child Left Behind Act, PL 107-110, Section 6202). The following requirements must be met for a school district to be considered as rural:

The school district must have an average daily attendance of fewer than 600 students or serve only schools located in counties with a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile **and**

a) the district must serve only schools located in an area defined as rural by the U.S. Department of Education under the Metro-Centric locale codes (which were in use at the time the act was passed) **or**

b) the local education agency (LEA) can demonstrate that it is located in an area defined as rural by a state government agency.

(No Child Left Behind Act, PL 107-110, Section 6211(b)(1))

## Federal Models for School Improvement

Since the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), districts and schools identified as persistently low-performing must implement one of the four federal improvement models listed below if they receive school improvement grants (SIGs).

| | |
|---|---|
| **Turnaround** | Replace the principal, screen existing school staff, and rehire no more than half the school staff; adopt a new governance structure; implement a research-based instructional program; provide extended learning time. |
| **Restart** | Convert a school or close it and reopen it as a charter school or under an education management organization. |
| **School Closure** | Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district. |
| **Transformation** | Replace the principal; implement a research-based instructional program; strengthen staff through professional development; provide extended learning time; and implement new governance and flexibility. |

(U.S. Department of Education, 2010a)

All four models are in use by schools receiving school improvement grants, with 71% implementing the **Transformation** model, 21% implementing the **Turnaround** model, 5% choosing the **Restart** model, and 3% choosing **School Closure** (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). For reasons to be discussed later, only the transformation model is a viable option in most rural districts.

## Questions Guiding Briefing Paper

The following questions guided preparation of this briefing paper:

1. What are the barriers and challenges to transforming low-performing rural schools?
2. What are the unique attributes of rural communities that can be beneficial in transforming low-performing schools?
3. What strategies and actions promote improvement of low-performing schools in rural locations?
4. What local resources and partnerships can be leveraged to promote transformation of low-performing schools in rural areas?

## Procedures

To gather information on transforming rural districts and schools, Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) staff searched two education literature databases: EBSCO and ERIC. The Internet was also searched using Google Scholar. A variety of search terms were used, alone or in combination with the term "rural": "school turnaround," "school and district transformation," "school improvement," "transforming districts and schools," "comprehensive school reform models," "turning around schools," "alternative strategies for school turnaround/transformation," and "manage change in schools." The literature located through the search focused primarily on the barriers and challenges that rural areas face when attempting to improve low-performing schools. Some also addressed incorporating the contextual attributes that are unique to rural districts and schools into the transformational process. Additional information for this paper was obtained from the following web sites: Ed.gov, Center on Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Census Bureau, and the Institute of Education Sciences. Also, some materials were located by examining reference lists in the papers that were retrieved from the literature searches.

## Limitations

This briefing paper on transforming low-performing schools in rural districts includes the following limitations:

- Scientifically based research on successful implementation of the transformation model in rural districts is limited, and no universally accepted school improvement approach for transforming schools is available (Babione, 2010).
- Most of the available literature consists of general reports, case studies, and research studies that do not use a randomized controlled method.
- Due to the abbreviated nature of briefing papers, a limited number of research sources are cited.

The various strategies, programs, practices, processes, and models discussed in this paper serve only as examples, and in no way does their inclusion imply endorsement by SEDL or its comprehensive centers.

## School Improvement Models in Rural Districts and Schools

Current efforts to implement the four improvement models described earlier are providing some knowledge of what does and does not work when endeavoring to turn around persistently low-performing schools in rural locations. However, as of yet, there is little research-based evidence regarding their successful implementation (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). While any school improvement undertaking can be difficult, it is often more problematic for schools in rural areas, for reasons to be discussed below. Some rural districts have found that the transformation model best fits their schools' needs, although replacing the principal can be an onerous task due to a limited number of possible candidates. The other three models have not been considered as viable options for the following reasons:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Restart** | Few educational management organizations are willing to work in rural areas, especially remote areas, and do not have the skills or tools to meet the needs of the students and community in these settings. |
| **School Closure** | Closure is not an option because there are no other schools to which students can transfer; many rural districts are comprised of only one school each at the elementary, middle school, and high school level. |
| **Turnaround** | Removing half the teaching staff of a school is not a reasonable option because recruitment and retention of staff in rural areas is already difficult. |

(Corbett, 2011)

## Key Issues Affecting Rural Education

Developing a common definition for rural schools helps researchers in identifying and collecting data. Researchers have begun to collect data for identifying challenges, assets, and innovations that affect work to improve low-performing rural districts and schools. The American Youth Policy Forum (2010) identified seven key issues nationwide that have implications for policy at the local, state, and federal levels in terms of rural education. They are discussed briefly below.

### Federal funding formulas

Rural districts may receive a smaller percentage of Title I federal funding as compared to urban and suburban districts. The federal funding formulas were intended to increase funds for schools serving low-income students by using a number weighting for districts depending either on the number or the percentage of children at the poverty level. Because rural districts typically enroll fewer students, they may not benefit from the "number weighting" formula as larger, urban districts do. [O'Hare and Johnson (2005) note that many **state** funding formulas also penalize smaller, rural districts.]

### Partnerships across region, districts, and sectors

Rural districts often partner with other districts, organizations, and postsecondary institutions to provide resources for the students. Community colleges and community partnerships may support extended learning activities and training such as early college high schools, tutoring, apprenticeships, cooperative education programs, and summer employment for students.

### Technology

Technology has the ability to expand innovations and provide enriched classroom instruction to students in a rural district. In addition, virtual education can offer high-level academics and college-level courses. When using computers and labs as an essential component for learning, broadband Internet access becomes an issue—partnerships with businesses can assist

schools with this access.

### Teacher pipeline

Rural communities often rely on a "grow-your-own" approach to increasing the number of available teachers. Teachers native to the area may move away and return home as a way to invest in or give back to their community. Incentive programs may be established in nearby colleges to encourage graduates to teach in the community. Preparing teachers to work in rural settings is challenging because preparation programs are not usually designed to provide certification for teaching in multiple subject areas—frequently a requisite in rural schools.

### Transportation

The distances that exist between homes and schools in rural locations translate into long commutes to and from school for students. This is problematic in terms of cost and feasibility for extended-learning opportunities.

### Agricultural education

Rural communities tend to rely strongly on farming, agriculture, and ranching, and students need to learn the most current skills and practices to be competitive. Rural schools provide course offerings with an emphasis on agricultural science and can benefit by forming partnerships with universities with strong agricultural programs. Cooperative extension programs, 4H centers, and Future Farmers of America continue to play an important role in rural education.

### Innovative school models

Redesigning small, specialized high schools provides a unique chance to improve low-performing schools and offer diverse learning opportunities for students.

The above issues represent both challenges and solutions that exist for transforming rural schools—ones that do not normally exist in urban and suburban schools.

Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein (2012) also explored a variety of the factors or characteristics related to rural students and their families, as well as examining education policies that impact rural schools and communities. In addition, they reviewed educational outcomes for rural schools. The data used for their sixth biannual report, *Why Rural Matters*, were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau. The report's authors made the following four key points, which need to be taken into consideration when planning for school improvement.

### Enrollment

In the United States, enrollment in rural school districts grew by nearly two million students—an increase of more than 22%—between 1999–2000 and 2008–2009. By comparison, enrollment in non-rural schools increased by only 1.7%. Rural districts accounted for approximately 70% of the nation's total increase in student enrollment during that decade. Strange et al. (2012) reported that 31 states experienced growth in the total numbers of students in rural districts, with the gains strongest in Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

### Diversity

The Strange et al. report (2012) indicates that students of color comprise one-fourth of all students in rural schools; however, the percentages range dramatically from state to state. In Rhode Island students of color account for only 3.2% of rural enrollment, but in New Mexico they constitute 82.6%. Rural Hispanic enrollment increased by 150% nationwide and by over 200% in 13 states: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

### Poverty

Strange et al. (2012) reported that the percentage of rural students living in poverty has risen significantly between 1999–2000

and 2008–2009. The rate of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch increased from 31% to 41% of all rural students. The highest rate of increase was in Arizona, at 28.7 percentage points.

### Special education

The report's findings were contrary to a widely held belief that high rates of poverty have a positive correlation with high rates of special education. NCES identifies the percentage of students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which would indicate that the student qualifies for special education services. Strange and colleagues (2012) reported that that the higher the rate of rural poverty, the lower the rate of students with IEPs. Special education services are only partially supported by federal funds and, therefore, require additional financial support from states and local districts. Strange et al. hypothesized that the lower-than-expected rates of special education reflect a diminished willingness to deliver services to rural students who need them.

## Additional Challenges for Rural Districts and Schools

### Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Rural schools—like schools everywhere—want effective teachers in every classroom. As suggested in the American Youth Policy Forum (2010) report, recruitment of teachers for rural and remote districts and schools is a challenging task for school systems. Factors contributing to the difficulty in rural staffing in general have been described by Jimerson (2005) as pre-existing teacher shortage; comparatively low salaries; high incidence of multiple-subject teaching assignments; and actual or perceived social, cultural, and professional isolation.

Rural districts have difficulty recruiting and retaining new teachers because of unique conditions that exist in the districts (Monk, 2007). For example, Barrow and Burchett (2001) reported that 49% of rural science teachers in their study had more than four daily preparations.

In filling vacancies, rural districts reported at a higher rate either that it was very difficult or that they were unable to fill vacancies for 4 of the 12 teaching areas surveyed. English as a second language (42.3%) and foreign languages (48%) were reported as the most difficult (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006).

Many rural districts face the unique challenge of trying to attract teachers to high-needs, low-amenity areas and being unable to pay salaries competitive with suburban and urban schools (Jimerson, 2005). To overcome teacher shortages, rural schools are often forced to implement such measures as consolidating classes, employing out-of-field teachers, and decreasing course offerings (Jimerson).

In close-knit rural communities, a distrust of "outsiders" often creates barriers to collaboration between new school personnel and families (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jageleweski, & Rossi, 2007). This distrust may be further aggravated by the high turnover rates for teachers, as well as some teachers' desire to live outside the community and commute to work (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

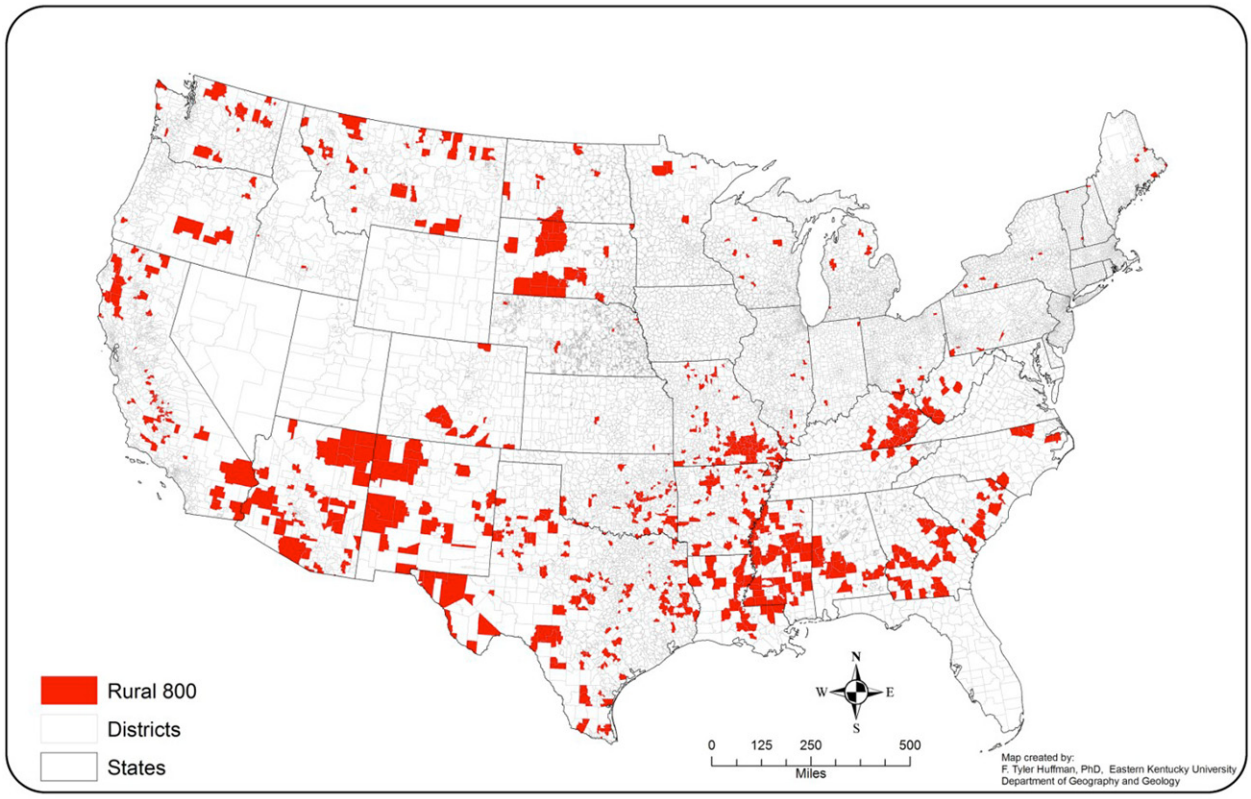
### Rural and Remote Locations of Districts and Schools

Small populations and geographical isolation are major factors school administrators must take into consideration in order to offer a high-quality education to their students (McClure & Reeves, 2004). By definition, these are the factors that characterize rural areas. According to Redding and Walberg (2012) many small family farms have consolidated and many families moved away after giving up farming. This has left large distances between the remaining farm families and communities, and such remoteness or isolation substantially affects rural families, their communities, and their schools and school districts. Johnson, Strange, and Madden (2010) concluded from their data that in some rural areas, the reduction in population was accompanied by economic decline and increased poverty.

### Dropout Rates and Poverty in Rural Districts and Schools

Johnson et al. (2010) reported that the highest high school dropout rates are located in the southern and southwestern states, and these states have among the nation's highest enrollments of economically disadvantaged students, both in terms of numbers and percentages. Johnson and colleagues identified 800 rural districts that have the highest student poverty rate nationally: the Rural 800. Seventy-seven percent of the Rural 800 districts and 87% of the students in them are located in fifteen southern and southwestern "target" states: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and West Virginia. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Rural 800 (Johnson et al., 2010, p.5). Used with permission of F. Tyler Huffman.




In rural districts in these states, just over 60% of students can be expected to graduate, compared with 70% among other rural districts and 67% among non-rural districts. The southern and southwestern rural districts with lower graduation rates serve considerably higher rates of minority students than do school districts with average or better graduation rates (Strange et al., 2012). In addition, the students are twice as likely to be English language learners (ELLs) as rural students elsewhere. Johnson et al. (2010) indicated that the Rural 800 districts overall serve considerably higher concentrations of ELLs than either their less impoverished rural counterparts (6.1% versus 3.3%) or their non-rural counterparts (6.1% versus 4.9%).

## School Finance

Johnson et al. (2010) cited work by Gershoff, Aber, Raver, and Lennon (2007) that showed low family income had a negative impact on children's cognitive skills. This caused these children to enter school less advanced in terms of knowledge and skills than children from families with higher income. In order for less advanced children to catch up with their peers, districts need to provide additional resources, which requires more funding. However, Johnson et al. reported that the highest-poverty rural districts spend less money per pupil than other districts. Their data reveal the discrepancy in funding of their 15 target states, which operate with less state and local funding per pupil than any of the other categories of districts (i.e., $7,731 per pupil versus $9,093 for the other Rural 800 districts; $8,134 for all other rural districts; and $9,611 for all non-rural districts).

## Advantages of Rural Districts and Schools

### Small School Size

Despite the challenges faced by educators when implementing rural school improvement, there are some factors inherent in rural settings that can be leveraged to their advantage. One of those factors is school size. Because of the challenges related to funding, many rural districts have chosen to consolidate so that they have access to more resources. However, research indicates this would not be an optimal solution. Williams (2010) reported that studies over the past 40 years have shown that students in small schools exhibit equal or higher academic achievement and graduate at a higher rate than students in large schools.

Recent studies that focused on rural areas have also correlated higher achievement with smaller schools and districts (Hopkins, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010; Redding & Walberg, 2012; Stewart, 2009). Both Hopkins and Stewart also reported that smaller schools were more successful in educating students from low socioeconomic households. Williams noted that slightly over 30% of the nation's rural school districts are considered small, with enrollment below 535 students, the median enrollment for public school districts in the nation.

Consolidation also raises additional concerns, such as time and expense involved in transportation. Further research may be necessary to determine whether consolidation has a positive or negative effect on student success.

### Strong Community, School, and Family Relationships

Redding and Walberg (2012) posited that another asset in rural areas is the strength of relationships among the people who constitute the schools and communities. This is referred to as "social capital"—the social networks and multiple relationships among people who live in close proximity that connect them to one another. This also translates into connections to each other's children.

In a study of high-performing, high-needs rural schools, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that the success of these schools was closely related to strong relationships with the families. Furthermore, they found that teachers in small, rural schools exhibit a high level of concern for their students' lives beyond the classroom; they tend to provide support for students' social and behavioral needs as well as their educational needs. Stewart (2009) and Hopkins (2005) also suggested that better performance by students in smaller districts may be the result of close family and community ties.

Redding and Walberg (2012) summarized some of the advantages that are often characteristic of rural school districts:

- School boards and school personnel with a vested interest in the success of students in their communities
- Teachers whose support for their students extends beyond the classroom
- Close-knit families
- Extensive social capital within the community
- Central role of the school in community life

## Strategies and Actions for Transforming Rural Districts and Schools

Due to challenges that rural districts face, such as location, recruiting and retaining of personnel, lower salaries, housing, etc., leaders at all levels of the organization are often required to design their own transformational approaches (Carlson et al., 2002). Additionally, rural districts and schools must rely heavily on available resources and use them wisely and creatively to drive the transformation process (Redding & Walberg, 2012). However, there are many positive community attributes and resources that rural districts can leverage. Strong family and community ties are commonly found in rural settings, and schools are often the center of community activities.

Support from community members can mean the difference between success and failure for transformational efforts in schools. Consequently, it is important that leaders and staff are familiar with the community's culture and individuals. Some rural communities may resist changing how their district and schools have historically operated, preferring to retain the status quo. Other communities might embrace the efforts and offer strong support for the transformational approach to improve the academic growth of their children (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Taking actions that engage the community, school staff, and other stakeholders in the transformational process requires purposeful and strategic planning.

## Know the Context of the District and Community

Most people in rural communities know each other and are often bound by the care, concern, support, and commitment for each other and their children (Chance & Segura, 2009). However, this culture can also lead to distrust or an "insider/outsider" attitude. Community members may consider those seeking to transform long-held practices as outsiders wanting to change the status quo or as government interfering in their decision-making autonomy (Carlson et al., 2002). Therefore, school leaders and staff should seek input from community insiders regarding the history of the community and school and should elicit their views on changes that they feel might be needed. It is also crucial to gather input from parents and students as well. Merging transformational changes into the existing district and school culture, listening to the stakeholders' voices, and integrating some of their suggestions into the change process will help develop trust among community members. Transparent communication will also create quick wins that can help build momentum for the change efforts, energize the staff and community, and inform those stakeholders who are outside the actual work of the reform process.

## Create a Vision for the Transformation Process

Change, including transforming the way a district and school have previously operated, can suggest to the community that its norms, values, and culture will not be considered in the process. Gathering input from all stakeholders, as well as communicating the need for change, is critical. Therefore district and school staff, parents, students, and other stakeholders must be included in creating the vision and basis for the transformation approach to be employed. Local and federal requirements and support must be addressed in relationship to the improvement effort. Additionally, barriers that might be encountered during the change process must be revealed and a plan should be developed for addressing areas of need.

The early phases of the process require candid and honest conversations about the barriers, as well as discussions of the positive effects that change will have on the community and its children. Integrating the existing culture, values, and norms into the transformational process will promote buy-in from parents and other community stakeholders. Such actions and strategic planning can create a supportive environment for transforming the district and schools' practices in order to improve student achievement.

## Provide High-Quality Teachers and Support Structures

Supporting teachers and other essential staff who choose to work in rural settings is vital to retaining them in their positions. Redding and Walberg (2012) strongly assert, "the people closest to the student have the greatest impact on the student's performance" (p. 2). Therefore, in addressing low-performance in schools it is critical to hire highly effective, skilled and credentialed teachers who have high expectations for all students, use research-based instructional strategies, differentiate instruction to meet diverse students needs, and develop caring relationships with students. To recruit qualified staff that are willing to come to a rural area, a district and school needs to offer equitable pay and incentives.

Developing a network of key district staff and community stakeholders to support those who have chosen to move to a rural area should also be considered as a means for retaining personnel. Such a network can help new staff assimilate into the school and larger community and diminish the isolation they might feel from being in a remote, rural area. Two strategies can be implemented by the school-level leaders:

- Provide staff with time to work collaboratively with others, examine curriculum and student work, learn new teaching practices, reflect on their instruction, and network with their peers.
- Provide time for teachers and other essential staff to engage in action research around creating a coherent PK–12 curriculum that includes research-based teaching strategies, is aligned to the state standards, uses formative and benchmark assessments, and monitors and measures the impact that instructional delivery has on student achievement.
(Babione, 2010; Chance & Segura, 2009; Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007)

Professional development should be relevant, should increase staff knowledge and skills in classroom management and instructional strategies, and should be aligned to the district and school's improvement initiatives. In addition, support from instructional coaches, school leaders, teacher leaders, and mentors is an essential element of job-embedded professional development. Engaging local technical assistance around professional development, modeling, coaching, and the monitoring and evaluating process is key to sustaining the transformational process. Regional education service centers or comprehensive centers, as well as other professional service providers, may be able to provide this type of assistance.

## Employ Technology

Rural districts and schools may need to rely on technology to provide students with additional learning opportunities and teachers with necessary professional development. Technology can enable students to access a wider range of curricular content than is available at the school. Rural schools are often limited in the range of classes they can offer, in access to educational resources that might advance students' learning in their particular areas of interest, and in the ability to provide remedial support to struggling students (Redding & Walberg, 2012). To help mitigate these limitations, a school or district can provide technology that allows students to engage in distance learning, on-line courses from virtual schools, iTunes U, and correspondence courses.

Moreover, the use of technology can allow staff to find and examine innovative teaching practices and bring learning experiences to the classrooms through online tutorials and courses. For example, online tutorials can demonstrate how to use software in the classroom and with students; on-line videos can allow students to see places they might otherwise never experience. Providing appropriate technology and resources to teachers also allows them to further their own learning and acquire professional development through webinars and electronic media, thus reducing the need to travel over long distances. Technology can allow staff to network with teachers throughout the nation and share knowledge.

## Provide Early Child Development Opportunities

As noted by Addy and Wright (2010), poverty is on the rise, especially in rural areas. This may hinder children's ability to learn, their intellectual and behavioral development, and their well-being. Klein and Knitzer (2007) reported that engaging in early childhood learning opportunities, such as pre-school for 3- and 4-year olds and all-day kindergarten, has been found to be a key factor impacting children's readiness to learn in school, their propensity to engage in higher education opportunities, and their future employment and wages earned. The researchers further note that more advantaged pre-school-aged children score about 60% higher on cognitive testing than children in the lowest socioeconomic group. Four-year-old children living in poverty are typically delayed a year and a half in terms of cognitive development when compared to what is normal for their age group; this gap still exists at age 10 (Klein & Knitzer).

Because many children in rural settings live in poverty and their opportunities for learning and life experiences may be limited, providing pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten would be advantageous for rural districts and schools (Malhoit, 2005; Redding & Walberg, 2012). Such programs are essential for preparing students to learn. Leadership in rural districts and schools must be aggressive in seeking funds to subsidize and implement school-centered early childhood programs (for 3- and 4-year-old children) and full-day kindergarten; seeking local and external partners in providing wrap-around services to families and students; and building partnerships with institutions of higher education to recruit, train, and certify local teachers and childcare providers. District and school facilities can be used to house the wrap-around services for students that help ensure they will be ready to learn upon entering school. Beginning support early in childhood can also prepare children for post-secondary education and career opportunities. A further advantage is that it may foster relationships with parents and community members and provide a quick win for moving the transformation process forward.

## Extend Learning Opportunities

Engaging students in out-of-school learning experiences during the summer or after school is crucial for students living in rural areas. District and school leaders must advocate for developing programs that are aligned to school curriculum and state standards but are provided through community programs housed in school facilities. The community and district should consider partnering to seek funding and other resources to operate extended-learning opportunities for students so they can continue to build on the skills they learn in school (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

Thinking "outside the box" to secure needed funding, as well as leveraging the resources found in the community and acquiring support from external partners are strategies that can be applied in several areas in addition to extended learning opportunities. Efforts to provide incentives for recruiting and retaining effective teachers, implement mentoring and technical assistance programs, update technology resources, and provide early childhood development opportunities can all benefit when district and school leaders search for creative solutions.

### Provide Parent and Community Development and Outreach

Some families in rural communities do not see the value of education and/or the improved lifestyle opportunities that education can provide. The district and schools should provide options that could broaden student aspirations and future goals (Malhoit, 2005). Schools and districts should consider developing a plan and program that will build parents' understanding of the value of education and how the transformation process will open opportunities for their children. Furthermore, it is crucial to provide frequent and transparent communication regarding

- the progress of the transformation effort,
- its impact on students' achievement,
- the school's performance,
- how the district intends to address and close the achievement gap,
- how barriers and issues that impede student achievement are addressed, and
- what the parents' and community's roles are in supporting the improvement effort. (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

Providing ongoing, purposeful training and learning activities for parents and the community, as well as providing meaningful volunteer opportunities, is also vital to transforming the school successfully. Because the school is usually the center of the community, the district and school should consider partnering with other organizations that can provide wrap-around services to support parents and their children. Such efforts can also increase parents' knowledge and skills for helping their children succeed in school and possibly advance their own work situations. Providing much needed services for the community and students can anchor the transformational approach in the existing culture and create a framework for the change process to establish roots for its new way of operating.

## Conclusion

The National Center for Education Statistics has identified nearly 11.4 million students as attending schools in rural districts, a figure that represents over 23% of public school students. These students are as economically and culturally diverse as their communities—there is no single profile. Data reported by Johnson et al. (2010) show that in rural districts 40% of the students live in poverty, 25% are children of color, and 12% have changed residence within the past year. These students are located in all 50 states, but the greatest concentration occurs in the states of the south and southwest. It is becoming increasingly critical for policy makers to address the challenges that rural districts, schools, and students bring to the national commitment of improving student outcomes and closing the achievement gaps.

Rural educational issues cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, but current research offers some solutions and insights into turning around low-performing rural districts and schools. Of the four possibilities set forth by the U.S. Department of Education, the transformation model holds the most promise for rural schools. Successful transformation is often attributed to thoughtful and flexible school leadership and staff actions that integrate a community's unique qualities into the change process. In rural communities, strong relationships and connections usually exist between school staff, parents, students, and the community members. These attributes should be leveraged to promote student achievement and the success of the school reform efforts. Transformation at all levels of the school system requires an intentional focus that is broad-based and includes the voices and ideas of all stakeholders. Employing a transformational model that integrates the unique attributes and resources found in rural communities into school improvement efforts is crucial to changing long-standing practices, gaining support from stakeholders, and improving the academic achievement of all students.

# State of the States

The states served by the Texas Comprehensive Center and the Southeast Comprehensive Center were invited to contribute information concerning school turnaround work currently in progress in their states. The following descriptions were provided by staff from the respective state education agencies (SEAs).

## School Turnaround in Alabama

Turning schools around is a daunting task! Many factors contribute to the reasons some of our schools are not performing well. The major challenge in turning schools around is figuring out where to begin—which factors make the most difference. Alabama is placing a laser-like focus on classroom instruction. Too many turnaround efforts are concentrated around the perimeter of the classroom instead of the interior of the classroom, which is the "hub" of learning.

In the fall of 2011, the Alabama Department of Education launched the Instructional Strategies Project (ISP). The ISP is a joint effort within the state department that seeks to carry out the state's mission to provide the standards, resources, and support local education agencies (LEAs) need to ensure ALL students graduate college and career ready. In terms of resources, the ISP provides a way of thinking about instruction that is common across the curriculum and across all grade spans; yet it does not, at all, limit teachers' creativity. In terms of support, the state and regional staffs who work with instruction have been provided professional development regarding this approach to instruction and are equipped to support it at various levels. Alabama's state standards from the courses of study identify the **content** or the "what" of instruction, and the Instructional Strategies Project aims to define the **concepts** or the "how" of instruction.

The aim of the ISP is to achieve the following outcomes:

1) Illustrate "how" research-based strategies are used across the curriculum and across all grade spans. Alabama believes there is a way of instructing that is differentiated, applicable, and appropriate for all students K-12.
2) Provide a planning and observation tool that emphasizes teaching curriculum standards, effective pacing and purposeful instruction with active student engagement, and daily formative assessment. The aim is to assure that teachers and administrators are "on the same page" regarding instruction. If teachers use a specific process to plan instruction, and administrators use the same process when observing, they are able to have rich discussions about visible/measurable student learning and clearly define action steps for subsequent instruction.
3) Provide an evaluation tool that illustrates the effectiveness of instructional strategies. There are thousands of strategies at teachers' fingertips, but not all of them result in optimal student learning. Providing a tool with which educators can evaluate strategies allows teachers to seek out new strategies and discern if and when they will help students meet the desired learning outcomes.

To accomplish these outcomes, the ISP focuses on four "global strategy sets." The strategy sets include 1) Questioning, 2) Generating Student Responses, 3) Graphic/ Visual Tools, and 4) Learning Groups. The ISP development team selected these sets because there is a large body of research behind the effectiveness of each one, they promote differentiation, and they are applicable and appropriate both across the curriculum and at all grade levels. Therefore, the state department is endorsing the Instructional Strategies Project because it promises to remove some language barriers and focuses intently on evidence of student learning.

The Instructional Strategies Project is a process rather than a program. It attempts to make the strategic thinking behind effective instruction visible. It is important to note specifically what the project "is" and "is not." The ISP is a different approach to

- planning instruction,
- delivering instruction,
- assessing instruction, and
- reflecting to adjust instruction.

It is not

- a mandate,
- a program,
- a quick fix, nor
- a repository for ready-to-go lessons.

The project provides a framework for teachers to plan lessons, reflect on the learning that occurred in each lesson, and make "real time" decisions about subsequent instruction driven by formative assessments. It is critical to note the emphasis the ISP lesson structure places on collecting and using evidence of student learning "in the moment" of instruction. For example, student engagement is measured by gauging student involvement in reading, writing, talking, listening, and investigating throughout the day's lesson to ensure 100% engagement in each of these modes of learning. Student engagement and formative assessment

are the pillars of the lesson framework. The process defines a way of working. The framework requires complex thinking and judgment on the part of the teacher. Just "going through the motions" will not positively affect student achievement.

To see change, schools must commit to on-going professional development with the project, and implementation must be consistent across the curriculum and at all grade levels. The ISP lays a sturdy foundation for instructional coaching. Capacity and sustainability depend upon collaboration and support from colleagues, which is the method most favored by research.

Professional development is provided to state department staff, district and school administrators, and teachers via a blended model of electronic and face-to-face learning. On-going professional development begins with a webinar and is followed by on-site support either at the district level or by state and/or regional staff. Professional development resources are housed at the ISP website (see below). Each webinar suggests ways to implement the ISP in classrooms and provides tips for getting started.

The power and promise of the Instructional Strategies Project lies in the fact that it is a collaborative, cross-section priority within the State Department of Education designed to unify initiatives. It is built to be the tiered instruction model that is central to Alabama's Response to Instruction (RtI) implementation, the method of instruction recommended for the 2010 Math and English Language Arts Courses of Study, as well as all subsequent courses of study, the focus of School Improvement on-site support, and the recommended daily practice for Alabama's teacher evaluation continuum, Educate Alabama. The project will be implemented in phases with increasing rigor. In addition to the design team, colleagues from all sections of Alabama's Office of Student Learning contribute regularly to the development of the project.

Sustained school turnaround happens from the inside out. The Instructional Strategies Project provides the teaching processes that can make turnaround possible and permanent. For more information, please visit the Instructional Strategies Project website at http://alex.state.al.us/isp/.

## Louisiana Department of Education: School Turnaround

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has established a School Turnaround Office (STO) to build state and local capacity to turn around persistently low-achieving schools. The work of STO is aimed at preventing the need for state takeover by the Recovery School District. The STO works in close collaboration with other divisions of the Office of Innovation—the Human Capital Office and the District Support Office—as well as other offices across LDOE.

STO has two major goals:

1. To produce significant gains in student achievement within three years so that no school is in jeopardy of state take over.
2. To prepare the Local Education Authority (LEA) and impacted schools for the longer process of transforming into high-performance organizations.

STO supports school-level turnaround by working directly with LEAs to make effective school-level changes. For example, a team of STO field strategists helps school districts build their capacity to support their schools through effective district-level practices that are aligned with LDOE's school-level and district-level frameworks for turnaround. These frameworks address such areas as human capital, autonomy and accountability, instructional strategies, and targeted resources.

One of the ways STO is supporting school turnaround efforts in Louisiana is through the federally funded 1003(g) School Improvement Grants. Under the program, districts are required to choose one of four intervention models—turnaround, restart, transformation, or closure—to implement in their eligible schools and to create strategic plans to be funded over a three-year period.

Of Louisiana's 68 SIG schools, 19 are implementing the turnaround model, 36 are implementing the transformation model and 13 are implementing the restart model. In the Round 1 SIG competition (FY10), LDOE awarded over $29.5 million in grants to 18 LEAs on behalf of 32 eligible schools, one of which has since closed. In the Round 2 SIG competition (FY11), LDOE awarded approximately $45 million to 16 LEAs on behalf of 38 schools. Louisiana is currently preparing for a third round of competitive SIG grants.

The goals of the SIG program are to significantly raise student achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment rates through targeted intervention strategies that increase student attendance and enrollment in advanced courses, improve school

culture and climate, strengthen the quality of school staff and instruction, and ensure the availability of social services and community support for students.

These efforts are helping Louisiana school districts serve their stakeholders with schools led by highly effective leaders and an aligned supportive school system.

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