Small Town, Big Talent

Identifying and Supporting Academically Promising Students in Rural Areas

Executive Summary

Academically talented students exist in every community, and schools across the nation strive to meet their educational needs. Not all K-12 students are served equally, however. Due to their geographic isolation and smaller student populations, academically talented students in rural schools may be overlooked. Educators and enrichment providers in rural settings confront many of the same obstacles that hinder the development of academically talented urban or suburban students, as well as additional geographic, economic, social, cultural, and educational constraints. With nearly 9 million students currently attending K-12 schools in rural areas — nearly half of whom are also eligible for free or reduced school lunch — there is a need for more high-quality enrichment opportunities to serve these talented rural students.

Recognizing this need, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has provided over $3.3 million in grants to outstanding providers of educational enrichment in rural areas since 2012. In extensive interviews, rural education experts in our grantee organizations shared their practical knowledge of the best ways to identify academically talented students in rural areas, provide academic enrichment, and help these students navigate their unique social, cultural, and emotional landscape. Combining their best practices with a review of already existing literature, we distill the major conclusions into 14 actionable recommendations, which we hope will be useful to a wide range of organizations, educators, and other interested parties.

Identifying Academically Promising Rural Students for K-12 Advanced Learning Opportunities

1. **Use quantitative testing appropriately.** Standardized test scores should not be used in isolation, but in combination with other measures. Consider using local norms or broadened guidelines to identify talent potential.

2. **Use educator and community feedback.** In small communities, educators will be familiar with talented students and their families, and community members will be familiar with other candidates whose exceptional talent manifests outside the classroom.

3. **Use student interviews.** Conversations with students uncover useful information not attainable through quantitative data or recommendations, such as personality traits or feelings of under-stimulation in school.

4. **Pay special attention to underserved populations.** The talents of students with financial need — as well as students in other marginalized groups — are more likely to be overlooked. Understand which groups are at risk and why, and actively seek to include these students in advanced programming and screening efforts.

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Providing Advanced K-12 Academic Services to Promising Rural Students

5. **Expose promising rural students to people and opportunities outside their home communities.** Bring them to college campuses and suburban and urban centers so they can experience these settings for themselves. If this is too challenging, start small — with regional visits, for example — or bring the exposure to them through visitors or online interactions.

6. **When possible, provide consistent engagement throughout the year.** Summer programming is extremely valuable, but year-round engagement deepens learning, strengthens relationships with students and their families, and keeps students focused on their college and career aspirations.

7. **Encourage professional development in schools.** Many teachers have not been trained in identifying exceptional talent or meeting the unique needs of academically talented students. Devoting professional development to these topics is a worthwhile investment.

8. **When possible, take advantage of digital technologies.** Reliable technologies (e.g., fast broadband connections) are not available in all rural areas. Where available, however, they have enormous potential to expand students' horizons, provide access to rigorous academic content, and enable remote collaborations among similarly talented students.

9. **Provide acceleration and enrichment opportunities.** Use a pre-assessment to determine students' strengths and weaknesses, and provide opportunities for them to further develop their strengths and passions.

10. **Identify and address deficits in basic skills.** When rural students have gaps in necessary skill areas, they are fully capable of excelling with supplemental instruction. Tailor programming to strengthen areas that may have been neglected.

Meeting the Social and Emotional Needs of Promising Rural Students

11. **Cultivate a robust peer community.** Especially in rural areas, academically talented and driven students may feel lonely. Provide face-to-face opportunities for them to engage with other motivated, talented students, and encourage them to connect via social media.

12. **Connect talented students with older, near-peer role models.** Exposing talented rural students to successful, slightly older students generates excitement, provides a model for further development, and allows talented students to imagine future opportunities for themselves.

13. **Work closely with families.** Communicate frequently, ensure programming is aligned with community values, and connect parents of prospective students with parents of current students. Be partners in fulfilling their child's potential and holding schools accountable.

14. **Encourage investment in local communities.** Connect programming with the needs and values of the community. Cultivate leaders who will increase the economic and social well-being of the community. Strive to be a well-regarded cornerstone of the community.

There is no shortage of talented rural students; only shortages of opportunities and resources to identify this talent and support its development. It is our hope that these recommendations will guide academic service providers, educators, and anyone who seeks to fulfill the potential of the many academically talented rural K-12 students across the nation.