# Leadership Strategies for Maintaining Success in a Rural School District

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## Abstract

Success in a PK-12 educational environment begins at the top with school leadership. Due to economic problems, poverty and added responsibilities, leaders in rural communities throughout the United States face sensitive and distinctive challenges. Based on research and years of administrative experience as school and school system leaders, the authors aim to provide specific strategies for successful school leadership. These strategies will support positive actions and decisions related to financial and budget issues; recruitment and retention of teachers and other personnel; community involvement and intrusion; and the push for continued progress in the area of academic achievement. Included are detailed examples from the authors' personal experiences and support from the literature related to rural leadership.

## Background and Purpose

Rural communities in the United States have 9.6 million public school students making up 20% of the overall student enrollment of public schools (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer & Reeves, 2012). "Rural" is defined by the United States Census Bureau as "all population, housing and territory not included in an urban area" with urban being defined as 2500 people or more (Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categorizes "rural" as determined by an area's distance from an "urbanized area" or "urban cluster" (Rural Education in America: School Locale Definitions, 2006). Strange (2011) would argue that rural areas are small and remote and removed from the "progressive influences of modern life" (p. 9).

Rural school districts in the United States have had their share of challenges in the past. These previous issues combined with recent additions (dependent upon current educational trends) have persisted into the present. Limited resources and funding (Farmer, 2009; Franklin, 2012; Freitas, 1992; Lamkin, 2006, Sue 2013); recruiting and retaining quality teachers and other personnel with appropriate levels of expertise (Clifford, 2013; Ellis, 2008; Kollie, 2007; Lamkin, 2006; Sue, 2013); community intrusion and resistance toward change (Farmer, 2009; Lamkin, 2006); and pressure for increased academic achievement (Clifford, 2013; Lamkin, 2006) are all issues faced on some occasion by school districts and their leaders. The latter three issues are often related to the first through some relative means. It is ultimately the school system leadership (school board members, superintendents and principals) who are called upon to deal with and find solutions to these challenges.

Most school board members, whether appointed or elected, are only required to have a high school or General Educational Development (GED) diploma (Roberts & Sampson, 2011)

and are often not educated in or familiar with major issues of the profession (Anderson & Snyder, 2001). This is interesting given the fact that they are the highest level of leadership in a school district (Anderson & Snyder, 2001, p. 228) and responsible for the hiring and possibly firing of the superintendent. With this come even more exacerbated challenges for the survival and hopefully positive advancement of a school system. Unfortunately, with such numerous areas of need, recruiting qualified and experienced superintendents and other district administrators can be a struggle, causing many rural communities to find themselves with persons for those crucial roles sometimes lacking in training and experience. Turnover for superintendents in rural communities tends to be high (Chance & Capps, 1990; Czaja & Harman, 1997; Grady & Bryant, 1991) due to factors such as the declining economy and population, community involvement, inadequate salary, and the use of the position as a stepping stone for better opportunities (Grady and Bryant, 1991). Furthermore, Clifford (2013) found ineffective school leadership on the part of school principals to often be the cause of low student achievement and school failure.

During the winter of 2009, an article by Tod Allen Farmer appeared in *The Rural Educator* addressing political challenges faced by rural educational administrators and providing recommendations for "accomplishing organizational objectives within a political environment" (p. 29). We go a step further in this paper to focus on more specific challenges rural school systems are facing, especially in a tightened economy, and to provide suggestions of strategies for school system leaders. These strategies will help promote successful outcomes in those areas of finance; recruitment and retention; community involvement; and academic achievement.

Often school system problems begin at the top with the school board lacking the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with other school leaders, faculty and the community.

Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2005) state poor leadership in general as a reason for persistently low student achievement. Clifford (2013) more specifically claims "inadequate principal training, lack of leadership abilities, and poor leadership abilities" as reasons for school failure (p. 51). Steps to eliminate any lack of communication and/or collaboration should begin with the school leaders.

When we hear about professional development in education, it is often thought of as a requirement for teachers. However, there is a need for on-going professional development for school leaders (from school board members and superintendents to building level administrators) providing them with strategies and ideas to support their teachers and each other (Anderson & Snyder, 2001; Clifford, 2013; Roberts & Sampson, 2011). These types of communication can be a major support for leaders in their role as school frontrunner. They may also be a major factor in the "turnaround" of failing schools (Clifford, 2013, p. 51). Whether lack of experience or poor leadership, or issues with collaboration between leadership and faculty or amongst faculty itself, it is ultimately the school leaderships' responsibility to realize solutions to new and recurring problems. This paper, through research, real-life examples, and years of public school administrative experience, is written as a support to new and veteran rural school leaders dealing with the daily issues related to the successful operation of an individual school or system. The information provided in this paper can be used as a supplement to the professional development initiatives provided for school administrators or a personal resource for school leaders to support reform initiatives in their school or system.

## Budgets and Finance

It is unfortunate that the struggling economy is causing difficulties for some rural systems, leaving communities to question if their social and educational hub will in fact survive.

Strange (2011) states, "For many rural communities, the primary school funding issue now is whether they can have a school at all" (p. 10). In unsettling economic times like those at present, closing schools, and cutting positions may appear an easy solution, but school district administrators with the appropriate experience and expertise find creative and more benevolent ways in which to maintain success and continuity.

With the arrival of each new academic year all school systems, rural and urban, are given additional responsibilities for student needs and have state and national mandates of heightened and superfluous requirements concerning overall academic achievement. For example, in a letter from the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education to Jim Rex, the South Carolina Superintendent of Education at the time, a description of new Title I regulations was provided, highlighting such requirements as, "all states submit portions of their accountability workbooks for peer review" (Briggs, 2009, p. 1). Freitas (1992) states that generally "rural school districts are low wealth districts with limited means of generating financial resources" (p. 14). Kollie (2007) adds that "because they're isolated, they do not have the tax base to build new schools or sustain the ones they already have" (p. 56). This is not always the case, but often rural school districts do find themselves struggling just to keep up with the more prestigious and monetarily supported districts. Strange (2011) states, "In far too many states, funding systems have been crafted that systematically deprive rural schools, especially those in low-wealth regions, of the fiscal capacity to provide an education that meets contemporary standards" (p. 10).

The mandates and expectations for more and better programs and results tend to increase while the financial support decreases. "Doing more with less" seems to be a phrase often spoken within the educational leadership arena (Franklin, 2012; Riddile, 2010). Freitas (1992) states

that, since the 1980s, educational programs in rural school systems have been affected by "economic problems" and "fiscal pressures on rural governments" (p. 14). With the current economic crisis, school systems are being told to cut up to 2% of their overall budget, yet the same groups continue to have similar or heightened needs, causing many administrators to have to make difficult decisions as to which groups are at the top of the priority list.

In past academic school years the county in which one of the authors has been the School Superintendent has had to furlough every teacher and all administrators for several days. Because of the open and respected relationship from the top down, there were no complaints (although no one really wanted to take a furlough). The employees knew that if there had been better options, they would have been taken, but the only other option was to lay off workers.

A few suggestions for dealing with economic constraints are:

- Communication. The most important strategy is to communicate the truth to all parties affected. This communication must take place both horizontally (at the same level or department) and vertically (at higher and lower levels or between bosses and their employees). One example is to send emails to the entire faculty and staff members about issues that arise and how they are being dealt with. Another is to call a face-to-face meeting for discussion and questions.
- Show employees that you are their advocate and that you are trying to correct the situation with the best interest of the students at heart.
- Meet with and/or contact state legislators to discuss current budget situations.
- In the end, if cuts have to be made, it is necessary to explain beforehand what the criteria are for making those cuts. This is why it is important to have a Reduction in Force (RIF) Policy. This policy should be made available and explained to all

employees. If cuts have to be decreed, be transparent. If you cut someone because you do not "like" them or you keep someone because of "who they know" you are asking for trouble. And, when making cuts, start at the top and work down. For example, although it may hurt, a superintendent should make cuts from their own salary and their office before making any cuts at the school level. This is the right thing to do and you are leading by example, not just words.

- When money becomes scarce for school projects such as remodeling, recruit volunteers from the community.

Forner, Bierlein-Palmer and Reeves (2012) interviewed school leaders and found that superintendents have to be "creative in terms of finding new sources of school monies and more assertive in terms of reprioritizing how existing monies are spent" (p. 6).

## Recruitment & Retention of Teachers

In tough economic times, money, or the lack thereof, can be a key deterrent for enticing quality educators to a rural community. The United States Department of Education *Status of Education in Rural America Report* (2007) states, "Public school teachers in rural areas earned, on average, lower salaries in 2003-04, than their peers in towns, suburbs, and cities, even after adjusting for geographic cost differences" (Indicator 3.10, p. 79). Strange (2011) states that "the challenge of luring a teacher to a small, low-wealth rural community with limited amenities, poor housing, and few college-educated peers, and keeping that teacher there beyond the first beckoning from a better situated district, is simply daunting" (p. 12). Rural teachers also reportedly feel unprepared to meet the array of unique needs of students in these communities (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Many districts are actually forced to cut teaching and paraprofessional positions with cuts in budgets, which means the last hired are generally the first

to go instead of a scenario where quality teachers stay. Tenure restraints mean that years-of-service generally take precedence over quality in the classroom. As the economy begins to make a comeback and districts are able to move ahead with the hiring process, rural communities will want to attract the best of the best.

Examples of initiatives for recruiting and retaining quality educators include the following:

- It is difficult to keep employee morale positive in tough economic times. The administrator must go above and beyond looking for positive traits on which to compliment employees. A sincere hand-written note to an employee means a lot. When visiting schools or classrooms carry a notebook filled with several note cards and leave positive notes when appropriate. Mailing a positive note to an employee's home is a good way to build morale.
- Learn the names of people who work in the district and schools and call them by their names when the opportunity arises. Keep a school directory available with names and factual information, and before visiting a school or classroom look over the list to refresh your memory.
- As an administrator do not be concerned about popularity, rather be concerned for being fair and doing what is right. If a person loses the respect and trust of those who work in the organization, then you will not be effective and morale will suffer.
- Listen to teachers. Often teachers feel they have no voice and do not bother sharing ideas or strategies for the advancement of their school. If a teacher sincerely stops you or visits your office to share an idea, look at them when they speak. Treat them with respect. If it is a busy time, set up an appointment and explain that you want to

give them your complete attention. Have a "Suggestions" box or email drop box. In this format you can give suggestions your close attention at a time when you are not so busy.

- For recruitment, "Grow Your Own" initiatives such as meeting with students in middle and high schools to discuss reasons for choosing a teaching profession, and the implementation of a "Future Teachers of America" (FTA) chapter at the local high school(s) are positive.
- Meet on a regular basis with university teacher educators to explain the unique needs of rural students so they may integrate information and strategies for working in a rural community into their course content. Invite university faculty to curriculum or leadership meetings.

## Community Involvement

In rural school districts, community members are often involved in school functions and activities. There are volunteers who want to donate their time and energy and the schools would have a difficult time without their involvement. There are other community members who feel they must help with the running of the schools and with the decisions made involving operations and activities.

"People leading the schools in rural areas have to have a whole set of outreach and relationship-building skills that are different from what urban leaders must have" (Kollie, 2007, p. 56). A leader must learn to stand up to community bullies in a politically correct fashion, and be careful not to "sugar coat" the issues; however, one must be careful not to "burn bridges." This takes some careful planning of words and actions.

Examples of initiatives for keeping in check with community members are as follows:

- Connect with the community via the media on how and why situations are being handled, such as how cuts are being made if necessary.
- Sometimes in a rural community there are informal communication systems in place, (i.e. barber shop, gas station, beauty shop). Use these informal communication systems to your advantage. Tell people what is going on and why certain decisions must be made. It is a good idea to purposely stop at one of the local gas stations and purchase a soft drink or coffee and take the opportunity to talk with the community members in the store. Do not share anything that is confidential, but tell them why certain situations are being handled in a particular fashion.
- Foster a positive relationship with the media. Meet and talk with these people when there is a non-news situation. They get to know you better and vice versa. Always be honest and tell the truth. Avoid saying, "no comment." The story is sure to come out in print or on television. It is better to have your input. If the media suspects that a school leader is being untruthful or hiding information they may never trust that particular person again. Be careful of what is said, but be truthful. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell them you will get back with them and give them a timeframe. Make sure to follow-up. By all means, do what you say you are going to do so as to earn the trust of the media.
- Look for alternative ways to communicate your message. Speak at the Rotary Club, Lions Club and other civic organizations.
- Be seen and make yourself available to discuss situations. Try to attend athletic events as much as possible. You might be surprised at the number of problems you can solve before they turn into bigger ones by using a communication technique such

> as standing at the fence near the front gate of a ball game. If you work in a school system with multiple schools, do not attend an event in one school that you cannot do at all schools. If you work as a building level supervisor do not attend an event sponsored by one teacher or grade level that you cannot do for other teachers or grade levels. You do not want to be perceived as having a favorite organization, teacher, school or community.

Some valuable advice from Freitas (1992) is, "Do not fail to invite the public to participate in your school. Pay particular attention to the involvement of critics. They often have valuable assistance to offer. Most people are willing to help when asked" (p. vii).

## Academic Achievement

Several studies have been conducted to determine if there are differences in academic achievement among rural, suburban and urban students. In studies that have found significant differences, generally rural and urban students have lower overall achievement scores than suburban counterparts. Stewart and Varner (2012) found a significant gap in Common Core test data between urban and rural students. These studies quote availability of resources, socioeconomic status and parental expectations or community influence as important variables in determining academic achievement.

Semke and Sheridan (2012) declare, "Decades of research findings have pointed unequivocally to the relationship between parents' attitudes, behaviors, and actions and student learning and academic success" (p. 22). Unfortunately, Freitas (1992) found the value placed on formal education by family and community members is not as high in rural communities as in the "more cosmopolitan communities" (p. 13). This may be causing teachers' difficulty in convincing students and parents of the necessity of studying, being physically present in school

and coming prepared with the proper supplies and equipment. Yet, rural communities are under the same mandates and expectations as urban and suburban communities. Rural communities are finding it difficult to keep up with technology demands due to high costs and lack of training. "If you have a system where there are low education levels in the population, it creates a reinforcing system of low expectations, and it's tough to break out of" (Kollie, 2007, p. 56).

Kollie (2007) is also of the opinion that "school districts need additional monies to overcome the effects of poverty and adequately educate every child to the standards of No Child Left Behind, yet national funding isn't forthcoming to meet those standards" (p. 55).

When funding is low and academic achievement is not progressing as expected, suggestions include:

- Connect school and community through a high quality, culturally relevant curriculum (Williams, 2003). This strategy, often called "place-based education" focuses on real-world instruction and experience. Parents and students are involved and feel a sense of relevance for the education being provided.
- Emphasize community activities. The more students, parents and community members are involved in community organizations and activities the higher the overall morale and willingness to work together for increased student achievement.
- Incorporating a school counselor led intervention program such as the internationally known Student Success Skills (SSS) has been proven to improve academic achievement (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Carey, Dimmitt, Hatch, Lapan & Whiston, 2008.)

- Teacher morale has a lot to do with student achievement (Black, 2001). School and district administrators must find ways such as those described in the section on teacher recruitment and retention, to promote a positive school culture and climate.
- Implement (do not force) professional learning communities (PLCs). In order for these to be successful you need to make sure those involved understand the concept of PLCs, provide time for collaboration, and try to make these routine in the curriculum (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006/2007).

## Conclusion

During our tenure in the field of school leadership, problems and unique situations arose on a daily basis. Through trial and error, listening to other school leaders, and keeping current in educational leadership strategies and initiatives, we feel we have had some successful outcomes. We have provided this information as a support to school leadership in dealing with the unique situations of a rural community school or school system.

School system administration is challenging, and at times extremely difficult. Leading a school or school system in a rural community has additional idiosyncratic tasks. Contextual challenges of rural school leadership include: poverty and economic issues faced by the community and school system; additional responsibilities due to lack of funding and personnel; and because of the nature of the community structure, rural leaders functioning on a highly public platform (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer & Reeves, 2012). If a leader is wise, thoughtful and thorough in decisions involving those on and off the payroll, it can be an extremely successful and satisfying position. It is imperative that rural school leaders know where the system is at before determining where it is going. Once a collaboratively developed plan is in place, communicating an overarching yet simple philosophy is a must. A good philosophy for leading a

school or school system can be as simple as: 1) Do what is right; 2) What you do, do well; and 3) Treat others as you would like to be treated.

As a leader of a school or school system, knowing who to befriend is of utmost importance. Farmer (2009) suggests "forming coalitions with power players, befriending those who may resist change and including all stakeholders in the decision making process" (p. 32).

Thinking through options, having the right people as part of the team and having open communication is at the core of a successful educational environment. With the best people the right decisions can be made and all parties will successfully pull through those arduous times.

Limited resources and funding; recruiting and retaining quality teachers and other personnel with appropriate levels of expertise; community intrusion and resistance toward change; and pressure for increased academic achievement are all challenges rural school leaders are likely to face. Knowing upfront that these are real and sensitive issues and having a plan with specific strategies for dealing with these issues will help make the job more enjoyable and is sure to promote overall success.

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