

Recommendations from the North Star State: Rural Administrators Speak Out

Julia M. Williams

University of Minnesota, Duluth

Gerry Nierengarten

University of Minnesota, Duluth

Administrators in America's rural school districts are uniquely challenged to meet increased achievement expectations despite decreasing resources. Mandated reform initiatives, population decline, and the complex formulas used to distribute tax-based funding have disproportionately affected rural schools. In this mixed-methods study, researchers first surveyed K-12 administrators and then conducted focus groups across six regions in Minnesota to determine the nature of the challenges specific to rural administrators and to document their perceived needs for interventions, training, and policy changes. The study identified two categories of common concern: student achievement and fiscal management. Within the category of student achievement, administrators identified four areas of need for assistance: testing and adequate yearly progress, achievement for all, staff and professional development, and data analysis. Within the category of fiscal management, needs for assistance included balancing budgets and transportation/sparsity policy. Analysis of the data gathered indicates statewide implications for professional development and policy review.

Key words: Rural schools, rural school challenges, rural school funding, rural school administration, Minnesota rural schools.

Across the United States, approximately one third of all children attend rural schools (Bryant, 2007). In Minnesota, thousands of yellow buses lumber down country roads, through cornfields, wheat fields, and orchards, across prairies, over streams, under tall pines, and across vast snow-buried acres, to bring one third of the state's students to school (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Over the past two decades, administrators in Minnesota's rural school districts have been continuously faced with the inequities and challenges of trying to meet both their districts' educational goals and new state and federal educational mandates with consistently dwindling resources, and decreasing capacities for generation of financial support from their own towns and cities. In addition, since at least 1994, rural administrators have been juggling a steady stream of concurrent and consecutive state and national reform initiatives (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006) including the intrusive No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

Minnesota's rural schools have unique needs and circumstances that impact the education of their student populations. Supported by a grant from the Center for Rural Policy and Development to identify those issues that most affect the state's rural administrators, University of Minnesota -Duluth researchers gathered information from the state's administrators of rural public schools (Williams, Nierengarten, Riordan, Munson, & Corbett, 2009). The aim of this mixed methods study was not to add

to the cries for more funding, but rather to identify possible levers that rural administrators may use to promote less disparity between country and city school children, and the opportunities they receive in schools. It was an attempt to give voice to administrators' perceptions of the needs of Minnesota's rural districts as distinct from those of urban districts, and to identify policies and procedures that currently present barricades specifically to rural districts as they attempt to balance budgets and address mandates.

Minnesota Rural District Challenges

Minnesota's rural school districts, as opposed to the state's urban and suburban districts, have been disproportionately affected by two factors in particular: population decline, and state and federally mandated reform efforts. Since 1995, as a result of legislation, indexed, inflation-adjusted PK-12 per pupil revenue (less building debt and special education expenses) in Minnesota has held relatively steady (Minnesota House Research Department, 2008). Increased achievement expectations, combined with rising expenses and without increased funds, have meant inevitable cuts to programs and staff state-wide. Rural schools have had to address the same expenditure cuts in addition to experiencing a steady decline in population due to lack of employment in mining and farming industries. The

impact of declining enrollment has proven challenging in terms of schools' effectiveness and quality. Simply stated, Minnesota's rural schools currently attempt to provide education to their students for significantly less funding per child each year than non-rural schools (Thorson & Edmondson, 2000; Thorson & Maxwell, 2002). The capacity to offer options for students to pursue special interests, accelerated course work, or remedial course work has been severely limited in rural schools.

In addition to decreased and unstable funding, Minnesota's rural schools have faced and responded to two decades of concurrent and consecutive state and federal reform initiatives and mandates, state testing requirements, increased reporting, and threats of sanction. To compound the challenge for rural districts, state-level professional resources have dwindled. Agencies such as the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) have found direct supports for outlying districts fiscally unfeasible in light of increased fuel costs and shifting priorities. Dwindling state support has served to increase the distance issues for rural access to services and information.

Identification of specific priorities of need in Minnesota's rural districts may provide insight to focus the state's available resources more effectively. Rural Minnesota researchers, McMurray and Ronningen (2006), have documented various rural district issues, including enrollment decline, linguistic diversity, and percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Thorson and Maxwell (2002) established Minnesotan rural-to-non-rural discrepancies regarding access to internet, use of technology for teaching, variety of course offerings, extra-curricular activities and advanced placement courses, and recruitment and retention of teachers. Warne (2010) established issues relating to access to broadband internet, ability to use technology effectively, and provision of special education services. Warne also identified rural needs as inclusive of finance issues regarding local levy referendums, options for shared services administration, and stable funding streams.

National Rural District Challenges

On a national level, research identifies common issues for rural educators across the nation. Reeves (2003) studied the impact of NCLB legislation on rural districts and found issues of sparsity and transportation, funding formula inequities, fiscal management, attainment of student performance and learning goals, teacher recruitment and retention, teacher shortages, provision of professional development and access to technology to be

significant. Others, including Bryant (2007), Cullen, Brush, Frey, Hinshaw, and Warren (2006), Lowe (2006), Harmon (2001), and Killeen and Sipple (2000), corroborate Reeves' findings regarding issues of funding, NCLB compliance and student performance, recruitment and retention of quality teachers, and sparsity and transportation. Lamkin (2006) identified an additional challenge to rural superintendents that includes changes in the work and nature of school boards. She stated, "Many rural superintendents discussed the challenge of district politics and board relations, with some talk about the change in the nature of boards, increased shared decision-making and the demands of continuous communication" (p. 21).

Common Rural District Challenges

Common to both Minnesotan and national studies, issues identified as pertinent to rural districts include: attainment of student performance (Bryant, 2007; Reeves, 2003), curriculum and instruction (Harmon, 2001; Thorson & Maxwell, 2002), diverse learner needs (Harmon, 2001; McMurry & Ronnigan, 2006), fiscal management (Bryant, 2007; Harmon, 2001; Reeves, 2003; and Warne, 2010), professional development (Harmon, 2001; Reeves, 2003), mentoring, recruitment and retention of qualified teachers (Bryant, 2007; Reeves, 2003; Lowe, 2006; Thorson & Maxwell, 2002), sparsity and transportation (Reeves, 2003; Killeen & Sipple, 2000), students with special needs (Harmon, 2001; Warne, 2010), instructional technology (Cullen, et al, 2006; Harmon, 2001; Thorson & Maxwell, 2002; Reeves, 2003; Warne, 2010), and working with school board members, including strategic planning (Harmon, 2001; Lamkin, 2006).

Context

Some Minnesota rural districts exist in close proximity to others, while others are isolated by waterways, sparse settlement, or as a result of population decline due to lack of employment opportunities. Since the state is subject to forms of severe weather (snow, mostly), some districts are less accessible than others in winter months.

As in other states, Minnesota's rural schools have experienced chronic enrollment decline as a result of the changing economic base in many rural areas (Thorson & Maxwell, 2002). They have experienced challenges due to operational expenses such as rising health care costs, skyrocketing transportation costs for districts covering large geographic areas, and increasing costs and demand for special education services. In addition, unlike the

state's concentrated urban school districts, Minnesota's rural districts are limited in their capacities to link with corporate or grant funding, or to take advantage of the purchase power of scale (Farmer, 2009). In fact, part of the disparity in funding between large urban school districts and smaller rural districts is due to economies of scale that favor urban districts. The study, *Small Schools under Siege* (Thorson & Maxwell, 2002), indicates that it simply costs smaller districts more per pupil to educate students than it does in larger districts.

However, in Minnesota, there exists a strong and passionate social desire to maintain the commitment to rural students and their communities. The close association between the economy and vitality of a town and the presence of a school has not only been demonstrated mathematically (Mykerezi, Temple, & West, 2009), but is also reflected in heartfelt responses across the nation in conversations involving consolidation and collaboration (Bryant, 2007). School administrators are often placed at the demographic, geographic, financial, and perhaps even philosophic intersection of a rural community. Their decisions must consider the needs of school children and the political pressures of mandates and legislation. It is the role of the principals and superintendents to consider the needs of both internal and external constituents of the rural communities' schools (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2007).

This study attempts to provide a glimpse into the needs for assistance that exist specifically in Minnesota's rural schools in order to better understand the realities for rural school administrators and to generate recommendations for changes in policies and processes that do not create or continue obstacles and inequities. Guiding the project were two research questions:

1. *What issues are most problematic for Minnesota's rural administrators?*
2. *How do rural administrators perceive these issues may be addressed?*

Methods

This was a mixed methods study using an initial survey and follow-up focus group interviews to gather information from Minnesota's rural administrators about issues affecting rural schools. The UMD research team created a six-page electronic survey that asked practicing rural administrators to rank their own specific priorities relative to pertinent issues extracted from current literature and from a review of current legislation. The 13 themes identified were:

- Attainment of Student Performance and Learning Goals

- Curriculum and Instruction
- Diverse Learner Needs
- Fiscal Management
- Professional Development and/or Mentoring Services
- Recruitment of Qualified Teachers and other Professionals
- Retention of Qualified Teachers and Other Professionals
- Sparsity and Transportation
- Staff/student Ratio
- Strategic Planning
- Students with Special Needs (IEP or 504)
- Use of Instructional Technology
- Working with School Board Members

Sample

The sample selected was the entire membership listing of the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA), and included superintendents, business managers, and principals. MREA administrators were asked to share demographic information and insights about rural issues. A total of 432 electronic surveys were sent to 141 school districts. Eighty-nine surveys were returned, of which 82 were valid as they were completed by intended respondents. The valid returns represented all six of the designated regional settings, and each region's responses included principals and superintendents. While survey respondents represented school districts that varied in size, and included one large district of over 8000 students, most respondents were from very small districts; indeed, more than two-thirds of the participating school districts served less than 1,000 students. Despite the lower return rate (19%) on the survey, all groups were represented. Percentages of respondents by group were divided as follows: superintendents – 26.8%, principals – 52.4%, business managers – 12.2%, and those who serve in mixed roles – 8.5%. The survey results were analyzed by frequency to determine most commonly identified issues to provide an agenda for conducting regional focus groups.

As a means of validation, triangulating and providing context for the results, researchers conducted six focus groups of school administrators to add depth and context to the survey responses, and to identify possible interventions in policy or processes. The focus group protocol was based on the issues identified by survey respondents and on current and proposed legislation. The focus groups were convened in the northwestern, northeastern, southwestern, southeastern, west central and east central portions of the state. Each focus group

consisted of either five to seven principals or superintendents, representing multiple districts within the regional settings. The conversations were electronically recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Analysis and Results

This study was conducted to address two research questions. The first question was: *What issues are most problematic for Minnesota’s rural administrators?*

To gather initial data regarding identification of priority issues for rural Minnesota administrators, the electronic survey solicited responses to rank 13 identified issues. Descriptive statistics were employed to rank the quantitative survey responses per item in order to determine priority of need for each role represented. Narrative survey responses were open-coded by the research team according to corresponding themes in literature reviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The narratives from the survey and

the transcripts from focus groups were initially open-coded independently by each researcher according to the survey items. To establish common coding criteria, the research team collaboratively established selective codes. After common criteria to reduce and condense themes were established, all survey responses were selectively coded by teams of two researchers.

As survey respondents considered their own concerns, they offered narratives to constructed response items regarding their priority needs for assistance or services. Among the 13 items presented in the survey, respondents representing all of the surveyed administrative roles ranked *Attainment of student performance and learning goals* as 1 or 2. *Fiscal Management* was ranked second, but largely by superintendents rather than principals. These two priority concerns dominated the first- and second-place rankings of respondents (Table 1).

Table 1

School District Priorities Ranked by Administrative Roles

Administrative Role	School District Priority ranked 1 or 2	
	Student Performance & Learning Goals	Fiscal Management
Superintendent	11	18
School Principal	32	2
District Business Manager	0	8
Mixed Roles from above	5	6
Total	48	34

Note: These results represent 82 respondents to the survey. The respondents included 22 superintendents, 42 school principals, 10 district business administrators, and 7 who indicated they held mixed roles in their district.

The research team identified themes of need based on responses to the survey, within the top priority concerns, and considerations for changes in policy and procedures affecting rural schools.

How would the rural administrators like to see these needs addressed?

Following the analysis of the returned surveys, the protocol for focus groups was designed to solicit either confirmation or discrepancy with the priorities established via the survey results, and to request recommendations for interventions that could address the needs of their schools. Questions included, *As you peruse the 11 listed priorities, on which do you wish you had more assistance, support, or collaboration?* And, *If you could recommend state, regional, or local policy changes that would assist or enhance collaboration or support, what would they*

be? Participants were also asked to identify successes and obstacles relative to the identified needs in their sites or districts. The established selective-coding criteria were again employed to code the transcripts of each focus group’s proceedings. Two researchers completed coding independently, and discrepant items were brought to the larger research group for coding via consensus.

Summary of Data Gathered

The following six categories surfaced most frequently throughout the survey results as needs for assistance to address the two priority concerns, *student achievement* and *fiscal management* (See Table 2): *testing and adequate yearly progress (AYP), achievement for all, staff and professional development, data analysis, balancing budgets, and transportation/sparsity.*

Table 2

Most Frequent Concerns and Related Needs reported by School Administrators Surveyed

A. Student Achievement Concerns:	<u>% of Respondents Identifying</u>
1. Testing and AYP	65
2. Achievement for all	39
3. Staff/Professional Development	29
4. Data Analysis	29
B. Fiscal Management Concerns:	
5. Balancing Budgets	52
6. Transportation/sparsity	32

Testing and annual yearly progress. The dominant theme of need identified by the surveyed administrators and the focus groups was, perhaps not surprisingly, related to state testing and AYP (annual yearly progress). Not only did the administrators express being overwhelmed with expectations for achievement within the identified underperforming subgroups, but they also expressed concern for subgroups of students, such as gifted and talented, students with specialized interests in agriculture, world languages, or fine arts, and disenfranchised students who meet the performance thresholds, who would be underserved as a result of the focus of the federal act. The administrators' concerns were expressed through the surveys and reinforced in all six focus groups with statements such as:

Student achievement has been artificially prioritized, often at the expense of student learning and growth. Meeting AYP is a top priority. Our school does a superb job in spite of the punitive accountability measures of NCLB. [Superintendent]

The effects of the priorities of the NCLB Act are exemplified in this principal's statement.

For so long, I think schools taught to the middle, you know, that's where the largest number of your students were at, and maybe some of those kids on the fringes weren't getting the resources they maybe needed. Well, now with federal No Child Left Behind, the focus has been on your at risk kids, which has been good. But now, on the other end, I think there's all this pressure for the gifted kids to provide them opportunities, and I think we're now teaching to the fringes more and focused on them, and we're not really worrying about the average middle kid. [Principal]

Balancing budgets. Balancing budgets was the second most commonly identified issue. Administrators expressed concerns that ranged from fiscal management of fixed and unpredictable expenses, to finding means to fund all students adequately. These concerns were expressed through

comments such as:

We just kind of say, 'One student, one price.' And we all know that each student comes with a different price tag. [Principal]

The education funding system ... basically states, the type of education to which you have access is determined by your zip code. And that's wrong. Any kid, no matter where they live, should have access to the same educational opportunities. [Principal]

Frustrations for administrators included the difficulties of the range of student services needed, the inadequacies of weighted per pupil funding, and the differences in the realities of educating rural students.

Achievement for all students. The third most commonly identified issue on the survey was achievement for all students. This theme was often linked to the concept of testing, but statements from across regions also demonstrated concern for students achieving their best according to their abilities. From early intervention, to high school level at-risk students, the administrators expressed needs for assistance to serve students across the spectrum.

It's time that we look at early intervention before kindergarten. I really believe that we need to go down past the 5-year olds, and look into the 3 and 4, not only our highest risk population, but all students, to jump start them to maybe help try to close the gap before it gets to someone at the high school, and that gap has gotten so large... We all see the gaps already in kindergarten, kids that come in. There are kids who are reading already and flying and there are kids who cannot identify letters in their name. [Principal]

Many rural communities do not have access to early child intervention at the level that exists in urban settings, due to distance, communication, lack of providers, and access to resources.

Transportation and sparsity. Needs regarding

bussing and student transportation were discussed by administrators in each of the six regions. Distances to bring students to school were part of the difficulties facing the rural administrators in the study. Transportation to provide access for extra-curricular activities from athletics to enrichment is compounded for rural students as extensive geographic separation exists in part due to designated school-size divisions for competition among High School League members. Expenses for extra-curricular transportation were especially exaggerated for those districts whose populations exceeded the limits for sparsity aid, but were located amid several smaller towns that were classified as competitive only in other divisions of the high school league. Larger rural districts have been required to travel great distances, often across the entire state, in order to compete.

In addition to bussing expenses, transportation issues in rural districts involve open enrollment. In Minnesota, students may choose to enroll in any district that can accommodate them. For many smaller districts, that means yellow school buses from multiple districts cross over district boundaries and often travel the same road, some even stopping for children at the same houses. The administrators stated concerns regarding the public perception of waste in observing so many district buses, gas and time. One of the superintendents in a focus group mentioned, tongue in cheek, that s/he has nightmares about three districts' school busses having a collision in the driveway of a single home in the country. Transportation concerns included: *We have 80 miles and it's in the woods, and it's scary, you know?* (Superintendent)

Often, the bus routes in rural areas of Minnesota bring challenges due to poorly maintained roads, seasonal and wildlife hazards, and the dangers of driving before or after daylight. In addition, there are other, unexpected challenges, such as drastically fluctuating fuel prices.

The spike in gasoline and diesel fuel was unexpected last year. All of our new revenue ... was used to pay off our gasoline and diesel bill [Superintendent]

Paying for fuel is not only a transportation issue in Minnesota schools, it also includes significant costs relative to heating buildings in extreme cold.

Professional development. The administrators' frustrations regarding staff development included the small amount of reserve resource that is mandated by state law for professional development. Rural personnel, for the most part, must travel great distances to obtain training. However, the state's required general fund set-aside monies are not

enough to provide adequate staff development dollars to meet the districts' educational goals and priorities. Examples of administrative comments related to staff development included:

I think the one piece that's so important for student performance in all areas is the teacher and so I think anything we do to focus on having the teachers do a better job, be able to teach better, is kind of a key, and I think a lot of colleges have gotten smart about offering graduate credits -- but I'm not sure they really have an impact on the teaching and changing teaching performance. [Superintendent].

While some graduate credit opportunities exist for rural district personnel, opportunities for staff to engage in professional development focus specifically on student achievement are available in multiple formats in more urban or suburban districts.

Data analysis. Over the past decade, the role of the educator in response to technology has been crucial to instruction and to access. The capacity for districts to utilize vast stores of student demographic and achievement data has been helpful, and yet overwhelming. Interpretation of large-scale test scores and their role in planning school improvement was not required study for much of the generation of school administrators or teachers who currently practice in rural schools. Concerns regarding misinterpretation of data, and the lack of skill required to display and accurately communicate meaning were expressed by administrators in each of the six regions. Ability to disaggregate and effectively relate student scores to program effectiveness was also identified as an area of need for assistance. Administrators stated:

We're standing hip deep in data with all of this stuff from the state, and our local data. Our teachers don't necessarily know how to use it... We just don't know how, at least in my district, to do that well and to keep focusing on it. We look at that whole list, and start running the different directions and start running after money; we haven't had a chance to focus on it now. [Superintendent]

You look at your district data ... it just feels like a conspiracy, because if you do a presentation to the community on your district data, the message is, "The longer kids stay in school, the dumber they get." [Superintendent]

Using data effectively, to garner support, celebrate success, and focus on improvement was a common theme in all focus groups.

Administrators' Recommendations

In addition to identifying priority concerns and their districts' needs to address those concerns, administrators in this study, through survey and focus group input, provided recommendations for how policies and resources could be improved to help tackle these issues. Two categories of recommendations were offered most frequently: a) policy recommendations related to the state funding formula, and b) resource recommendations related to State Department of Education and other agencies' functions and services.

Funding distribution. Recommendations for funding distribution considerations were proposed by administrators in all of the state's regions, and included advocacy for examination of funding practices addressing sparsity and transportation aid, budget prediction stability, capacity to address the needs for enrichment and at-risk, and designated funds for staff development.

Approximately 30% of the administrators surveyed and 100% of regional focus group participants noted that the state's current funding formula rendered provision of equitable, quality education difficult. Administrators used many terms to express the idea that they wanted a funding formula to provide dependable, reliable, sustainable, and consistent, funding levels to assure at least an equal, basic level of desired education across the state. Inflation-indexed funding from the state was suggested as one approach to providing a dependable funding level. Applying the formula only after transportation cost was covered was another. Some administrators stressed the necessity to use appropriate levy options to meet local needs and goals for education.

The participants in this study identified a need to revisit the current state funding formula in several areas. General dissatisfaction with the allocations was prevalent, with a majority of the participants identifying disconnection between the reality of small, rural school districts and lawmakers at the capitol. The problems of distance and economy were expressed in each region, due to busing, fuel prices, and the expenses of travel and supervision that compound disparate funding. Reconfiguration of the funding categories of elementary and secondary sparsity and transportation aid to reflect rural realities could address and expose the inequities of rural education provision. A formula that distributed weight to increases in fuel costs, and the combined effects of lower enrollment and lower capacity of rural districts to raise additional local funds, and the additional costs of transportation would provide

relief. Consideration should also include access to inter-district travel for enrichment, athletics, cooperative staff development, and collaborative planning.

In addition to allocation discrepancies, the regions referred to the difficulties of rural schools relative to unpredictable budgeting processes. Unstable and inaccurate budget projections reduce rural districts' capacity to attract and retain quality staff, to maintain buildings, and to purchase cooperatively. The annual possibility of falling short of spring projections is not conducive to commitment to personnel or programs. In urban areas, shifts in district allocations do not necessarily result in families of workers being geographically stranded as well as unemployed, while rural districts routinely place staff at risk of both. It would benefit rural districts if legislation could guarantee allocations after spring projections.

Participants in this study also reported difficulty in decision-making regarding prioritizing course offerings for a diversity of rural students – for example, those college-bound, at-risk, and with special interests. Lower incidence of these students in small districts often have forced administrators to make decisions to provide for the need of one group at the expense of another. Collaboration and combined resources could benefit students who fall into either of these categories. If legislation would support the Department of Education, colleges, universities, and other providers to identify the needs of isolated rural learners and to offer on-line courses designed for at-risk and for enrichment, perhaps districts would not need to ignore the needs of some learners in order to provide for the needs of others.

Agency practices and procedures. Rural administrators have very limited personnel resources to help them address their curriculum needs to make Annual Yearly Progress as is required by the No Child Left Behind Act. In each region, administrators expressed a belief that the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) should provide more support to rural areas. MDE, if directed by the legislature, could have a mandate to allocate staff resources and travel resources to bring expertise to rural school districts. A sense of this rural perspective is conveyed by this response:

Smaller districts, with the budget cuts, don't have curriculum people. They don't have test coordinators. They don't have test assessment [staff]. ... So if somebody in the district has to pick that up, the cuts at the state departments disproportionately affect the smaller school.
[Superintendent]

In addition, professional development of staff to

affect student achievement was cited predominately in each region as difficult to provide due to distance, but also due to lack of sufficient incentive to dedicate the state's currently required 2% General Fund set-aside without exercising waiver options. Too often, district staff exercises a right to vote to return the 2% set-aside to the general fund in order to address other urgent needs. If a legislative session were to direct districts to maintain the current 2% General Fund set-aside requirement for staff development, or to increase incentives for rural schools not to exercise the current waiver options, perhaps funding for staff development may become less frequently redistributed, and teachers' continued professional growth would become a common expectation among all districts.

Participants in each region offered possibilities for change in practices by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), state professional education organizations and unions, and colleges and universities that could directly and positively affect rural districts. The most prevalent requests for assistance were in regard to the Minnesota state tests and testing procedures. Mandated measurement that cannot yield data to inform in a timely and responsive manner may have little impact on instructional practice. Most often recommended were continued changes in the NCLB-required Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments to reflect growth within, rather than across cohorts, and for results to be provided to districts to use formatively for those students taking the tests. Several states have explored growth-based measures, and some actually have adopted commercial large-scale measurements in addition to, or rather than state-created instruments (United States General Accounting Office, 2003). Continued pursuit of options that define and effectively and efficiently measure growth in student learning is encouraged. Participants in the focus groups praised the procedural and professional development practices of the North West Evaluation Association (NWEA) and suggested the NWEA series as alternative to the state tests. According to the administrators, the NWEA test results are timely and instructionally sensitive, and the results are teacher-friendly and can be utilized to modify instruction.

A second theme of recommendation included issues of equal access to staff development opportunities. Distance to attend state-level staff development and the cost to the districts in rural Minnesota to bring MDE staff and other professional development providers to districts for assistance impede rural educators' equal access to information and opportunities. If, however, the State Department of Education, colleges and universities, and

professional education organizations were to offer online modules, or courses for initiatives defined in districts' work or action plans, the options for rural educators to stay abreast of current best practices may increase. Additional consideration for establishment of online professional learning communities with focus on issues of data analysis for decision-making, student achievement, and special education would provide rural educators increased opportunities, and to address isolation and access to collegiality in addressing student achievement as well.

In addition to lack of professional development, and time and occasion to share among administrators, participants in regional focus groups in this study also revealed increasing frustration with temporary gains in programs and services due to grant funding and the subsequent loss of promising practices and programs when grant funding expires. Participants, who have increasingly sought grant funding in order to offset increased costs, expressed disappointment in the loss of time and revenue used to establish collaborative grant work and the lack of continuous funding for programs that have provided effective interventions. If, however, colleges and universities sought partnership with regional rural districts to study and document the effectiveness of successful practices, including grant initiatives, and provide documentation for districts seeking continued funding for best practices, perhaps the lessons learned from one innovator or grantor could be utilized to inform others and to provide a basis for pursuit of addition funding. Consideration of the establishment of an electronic statewide registry of active grants and exemplary practices could provide a forum for sharing of promising practices to schools from all funding agencies. Access to reports from active grants, concluded grants, and other innovations could benefit districts, institutes of higher learning and state-level decision-makers.

Discussion

After analysis of this study's survey responses and focus group discussions, the needs and priorities expressed by rural school and district leaders indicate opportunities to review and revise current funding policies, as well as considerations to modify or review procedures employed by state agencies, professional education organizations and higher education. The top two concerns that emerged were: (1) student achievement, and (2) fiscal management, both of which are also identified in Minnesota-based and in national studies. These concerns align with the findings of Reeves (2003), Bryant, (2007), Cullen, Brush, Frey, Hinshaw, and Warren (2006),

Lowe (2006), Harmon (2001), and Killeen and Sipple (2000), in regard to issues of student performance and funding concerns impacted significantly by formula inequities, transportation costs, and population decline. From within these concerns, the participants identified needs for specific assistance regarding: testing and adequate yearly progress, balancing budgets, achievement for all, transportation and sparsity, professional development, and data analysis. These identified needs reinforce the findings of Reeves (2003) with regard to identification of the impact of NCLB legislation and provision of professional development. The priorities and concerns of the Minnesota participants align with the literature; however, the identification of student performance and fiscal management, and needs regarding testing, transportation, professional development and use of data may indicate policy and procedural adjustments are required to address inequities for rural schools.

Although public funding is the foundation for public school's viability, increasing funding may not be the only means by which the work of public education can be supported. In these difficult economic times, increases and decreases in allocations that do not include examination of policies and procedures impacting rural schools disproportionately relative to urban and suburban schools seem not to be in keeping with responsive, representative and constitutional government. The disproportionate impact of legislation on rural schools has been the focus of state and national studies (Bryant, 2007; McMurray & Ronnigan, 2006; Reeves, 2003; Thorson and Maxwell, 2006), and was clearly expressed in this study as well. Policy recommendations from study participants included changes to the state funding formula regarding sparsity, stability of rural populations, and staff development funding, which aligns with the findings of Reeves (2003), and others. Other recommendations fell into procedural categories, such as state testing, opportunities for collaboration, and professional development opportunities that are specific to Minnesota contexts.

It is clear that some rural educators perceive that it is within a state's power to improve rural education. While it is true that additional financial resources may always be welcomed, participants in this study identified means by which rural education may be improved through revised allocation of

current financial and personnel resources.

Limitations

The survey response rate (19%) was statistically acceptable for use (Bartlett, Kotrlík, & Higgins, 2001) but lower than researchers' expectations. All six of the designated regional settings were represented in the responses as well as various school, providing an inclusive sample of the rural schools across the state. However, the number of returns per region was insufficient for inferences regarding regional discrepancies. Therefore, results in this study do not include regional disaggregation. The survey responses were used to appropriately frame questions for the statewide focus groups as a preliminary tool, and not used as stand-alone data for the analysis in this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study revealed issues and concerns that stimulate further investigation. Expanded survey responses and increased numbers of focus groups to investigate continued effects of current and proposed legislation, policy and procedures unique to rural schools in Minnesota and other states could enrich the communication between rural districts and state and federal legislators. Longitudinal studies have potential to identify trends in rural schools' attempts to cope with disproportionate funding and service issues. Continued study may reveal possible solutions that may be useful to policy makers and rural schools across America.

Conclusion

To continue to offer quality education to children who do not live in cities or suburbs, changes in policy, priorities and procedures, if implemented in time, could make great differences to the children on the yellow buses going down the dusty roads. Perhaps by listening to the men and women who try to balance the needs and requirements of the federal and state mandates with the realities of the communities and the people they serve, we may be able to strengthen the connections between rural communities, their schools, and the folks who make decisions in places far removed.

References

- Bagin, D., Gallagher, D. R., & Moore, E. H. (2007). *The school and community relations* (9th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bartlett, J. E., Kotrlík, J. W., & Higgins, C. C. (2001). Organizational research: Determining appropriate sample size in survey research. *Information Technology, Learning and Performance Journal*, 19(1), 43-50.
- Bryant, J. A. Jr. (2007). Killing Mayberry: The crisis in rural American education. *The Rural Educator*, 29(1), 7-11.
- Cullen, T. A., Brush, T. A., Frey, T. J., Hinshaw, R. S., & Warren, S. J. (2006). NCLB and technology and a rural school: A case study. *The Rural Educator*, 28(1), 10-17.
- Farmer, T. A. (2009). Unique rural district politics. *The Rural Educator*, 30(2), 29-33.
- Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. (2006). Educational change over time? The sustainability and non-sustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 3-41. doi: 10.1177/0013161X05277975
- Harmon, H. (2001, May). *Education issues in rural schools in America*. Paper presented at Appalachian Rural Systemic Initiatives Conference, Lexington, Kentucky. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED455987)
- Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2007). Why rural matters in 2007: The realities of rural education growth. *Rural Trust Policy Brief Series on Rural Education*. Arlington, VA: The Rural School and Community Trust.
- Killeen, K., & Sipple, J. (2000). *School consolidation and transportation policy: An empirical and institutional analysis* (working paper). Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust.
- Lamkin, M. L. (2006). Challenges and changes faced by rural superintendents. *The Rural Educator*, 28(1), 17-25.
- Lowe, J. M. (2006). Rural education: Attracting and retaining teachers in small schools. *The Rural Educator*, 27(2), 28-31.
- McMurray, M. & Ronnigan, B. (2006). Rural education in Minnesota. *Rural Minnesota Journal*, 1(2), 1-19.
- Minnesota House Research Department. (2008). Minnesota School Board Association. *State of Minnesota*: St. Paul, MN. Retrieved July 5, 2011 from http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/issinfo/schoolfinanceover_files/frame.htm
- Mykerezi, E., Temple, J., & West, K. L. (2009). Cost-effective policies to improve rural K-12 education in Minnesota. *A region apart: A look at challenges and strategies for rural K-12 schools*. St Peter, MN: Center for Rural Policy and Development.
- Reeves, C. (2003). *Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act: Implications for rural schools and districts*. Oak Brook, IL: North Central Regional Education Laboratory. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED475037)
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research; Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage.
- Thorson, G. & Edmondson, J. (2000). Making difficult times worse: The impact of per pupil funding formulas on rural Minnesota schools. *Center for Rural Policy and Development*. Mankato, MN: Minnesota State University.
- Thorson, G., & Maxwell, N. (2002). Small schools under siege: Evidence of resource inequality in Minnesota public schools. *Center for Rural Policy and Development*. Mankato, MN: Minnesota State University.
- United States General Accounting Office. (2003). *Title I: Characteristics of tests will influence expenses; information sharing will help states realize efficiencies*. Washington, DC; United States Congress. Retrieved July 5, 2011 from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03389.pdf>
- Warne, L. (2010). Toward a logical, equitable and successful learning experience for all. *Rural Minnesota Journal*, 5, 1-8.
- Williams, J., Nierengarten, G., Riordan, K., Munson, B., & Corbett, D. (2009). Learning communities in transition: The voices of rural administrators. *A region apart: A look at challenges and strategies for rural K-12 schools*. St Peter, MN: Center for Rural Policy and Development.

Dr. Julia Williams is an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where she teaches courses in assessment and evaluation. Her research agenda includes effective continuous improvement processes in rural and urban schools, and context-based measurement of understanding.

Dr. Gerry Nierengarten is an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth, and teaches courses in special education. Her research agenda includes co-teaching, inclusion of children with special needs in general education and special education services in rural schools.