Rural Education: Examining Capacity Challenges that Influence Educator Effectiveness

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Eleven million children—a quarter of all American students—are enrolled in rural public schools (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Smarick, 2013). Despite these numbers, many rural teachers and administrators believe that education stakeholders are slow to fully recognize and address the unique challenges facing rural educators (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Smarick, 2014).

Rural education has, however, recently received moderate federal attention. Federal education initiatives and grant competitions, such as Race to the Top-District and Promise Neighborhoods, have included a specific focus on rural communities and education priorities. Additionally, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan toured rural districts in 2013 to spotlight the obstacles encountered in rural schools, and to receive insight as to what future improvements should focus on.

This brief addresses some capacity challenges highlighted by rural teachers and administrators including recruiting and retaining teachers, use of education technology, and teacher evaluations, followed by questions and recommendations for policymakers.

Recruiting and Retaining Highly Effective Teachers

Administrators working with rural schools and districts routinely cite difficulties recruiting and retaining effective teachers as having an adverse impact on school quality (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Smarick, 2014). Education stakeholders working with and within rural communities have attributed this issue to various reasons including undesirable geographic location, low salaries, insufficient resources, and lack of professional development and other support tools (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Robinson, Bursuck & Sinclair, 2013).

Researchers studying ways to improve rural education, such as those published in *The Rural Educator*, emphasize the necessity of high-quality professional development to recruit and retain highly effective teachers as well as administrators (Robinson, Bursuck, & Sinclair, 2013; Wood, Finch & Mirecki, 2013).

Professional development opportunities, materials, curriculum, and services are often not tailored for rural educators. Teachers working in rural schools have claimed that what they learn through some professional development courses is not applicable to their actual teaching environment, and multiple adaptations have to be made to make the training relevant to their classroom (Hardre, 2012; Wood, Finch & Mirecki, 2013).

Arkansas has implemented three programs to combat the issue of retaining teachers: High Priority Bonus Incentives, Teacher Housing Development Foundation, and the State Teacher Education Program. Monetary incentives are given to teachers working in high-priority districts at the completion of each school year. Other forms of assistance (financial housing assistance and continuing education opportunities) are based on the teacher's performance ratings. To successfully recruit teachers, districts use websites to actively engage candidates and help familiarize them with the district prior to applying for a position. Information on the website is based on studies identifying which monetary and non-monetary incentives or school characteristics are effective at encouraging teachers to apply (Maranto & Shuls, 2012).

Professional development also plays an important role in how successfully digital education initiatives are achieved in rural settings. Many states that have already implemented education technology initiatives are realizing that the impact of technology is limited without teacher buy-in and preparation (Moulton, 2014).

Recommendations

- Regularly assess the available tools, resources, and support systems in rural classrooms, schools, and districts, relative to others in the same state.
- Continually evaluate the effectiveness of methods of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, and adjust when needed.
- Invite input from rural teachers, administrators, and community members on practice and policy changes and recommendations.
- Ensure policies are informed by practice and/or evidence-based research from rural schools.
- Create networks for rural teachers and administrators to share best practices, lessons, and solutions to shared problems.
- Use both monetary and non-monetary incentives, when possible, to attract effective teachers and school leaders to rural schools.

Education Technology

Rural and urban schools alike seek innovative ways to improve education through technology. A lack of telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas can result in schools with poor access to the internet, impeding classroom instruction and learning (Howley, Kim & Kane, 2012; Tignor, 2013). A lack of connectivity in rural homes also adversely affects student digital literacy and remote access to digital learning resources.

Based in **California**, the E-Mentoring program matches teachers who are new to classroom technology with veteran mentors. The nationwide program alleviates some of the challenges teachers face when using new technology, and its online platform removes travel requirements for teachers to access this training. Rural districts that have implemented learning technologies cite teacher proficiency and professional development on effectively incorporating technology into the classroom as major factors for success (Sawchuck, 2013).

Many rural school teachers and administrators cite connectivity limitations as the primary obstacle to effectively using technology in the classroom (Howley, Kim & Kane, 2012). Without adequate broadband width, teachers and students experience difficulties with slow internet speeds and cannot always access online discussions, videos, and other learning tools (Howley, Kim & Kane, 2012). According to the federal government, 30 percent of schools currently operate with web connections below the government's definition of broadband internet access (3 megabits per second download) (White House, 2014).

To address this issue, President Obama announced the ConnectED Initiative in June 2013. ConnectED aims to promote individualized learning through digital content by increasing the number of schools with broadband connectivity and by providing teachers with professional training for new classroom technologies (White House, 2013). In February 2014, the president announced $750 million in private commitments to expand broadband access in schools and a commitment from the FCC of an additional $2 billion for broadband access through FCC's E-Rate program to connect 20 million more students to next-generation broadband and wireless. The White House also announced $10 million in distance learning grants for rural schools through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (White House, 2014). In March 2014, the FY2015 budget request also proposed $500 million for teacher professional development and high-quality digital instructional resources so schools can effectively use these new ConnectED resources (Office of Management and Budget, 2014).

This may help with the lack of professional development opportunities for rural teachers on how to successfully integrate technology in the classroom and lesson planning (Tignor, 2013).

Recommendations

- Create achievable short- and long-term goals for implementing technology in rural schools and other community centers. Regularly monitor progress towards these goals.
- Engage the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Service, including their 4-H programs, in expanding digital access and literacy in rural communities.
- Include rural educators in evaluating and improving upon the use of new classroom technology.
- Provide professional development courses tailored for rural teachers and administrators working with new technology.

Teacher Evaluations

Just as professional development needs to be tailored for rural schools and districts, teacher evaluation processes should also be tailored for rural schools. Tailored evaluations should take into account factors that specifically pertain to rural schools and that do not rate teachers on factors that do not fit within the rural school environment.

In **Minnesota**, education stakeholders have developed Joint Teacher Development and Evaluation training sessions. These sessions aim to improve the efficiency of teacher evaluations and ultimately provide optimal feedback to teachers and enhance applicability of evaluation results in the classroom. The sessions allow districts to develop individual local plans (Minnesota Rural Education Association, 2013).

Federal laws mandating certain characteristics of teacher evaluations may clash with the reality of the rural experience. For example, evaluation law may not take into account that teachers and administrators in rural schools may play more than one role. Laws might not consider how to rate a teacher who teaches a single subject across multiple grades, or a single grade level across multiple subjects (Schimel, 2014).

The amount of time an evaluation requires presents another challenge for small, rural schools with fewer personnel. A 2013 survey found that a substantive teacher evaluation requires 11–15 hours per teacher each year (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2014). Fewer administrators conducting evaluations means one person, usually the principal, is spending a significant amount of time evaluating teachers. Time spent on teacher evaluations is at the expense of the range of other areas that principals have to support, such as operations, teaching, and learning (Schimel, 2014).

Recommendations

- Provide professional training and implement technology and tools to more efficiently complete teacher evaluations.
- Invite administrators to provide feedback on teacher evaluation models.
- Develop evaluation models that are closely integrated with instructional coaching.
- Use models that are tailored to a district's environment.

Conclusion

There are varying definitions of what constitutes a "rural school." Although 72 percent of the country's land is occupied by communities that the U.S. Census Bureau recognizes as "rural," the populations living in these communities do not necessarily share similar socioeconomic and demographic profiles, or academic achievement levels (Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools [CSSRS], 2014; Smarick, 2014).

Consolidating diverse communities into one group may neglect important differences in the challenges and successes experienced within each community (Smarick, 2013). This diversity may also make it difficult to design and implement policies that address all the challenges teachers and administrators face in rural schools. However, these differences should not dissuade efforts to better understand and improve upon rural education practices.

Factors such as recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers and administrators, access to technology, and efficient use of teacher evaluation have proven to have a significant impact on the quality of rural schools and the achievement of students attending those schools.

Policymakers and education stakeholders should continually seek out information on these and other obstacles experienced by rural educators, and engage them in developing improvements and solutions.

Policy Issue	Questions to Consider
Improving school quality in rural communities	1. What information is available on the failures and successes with recruiting and retaining teachers, use of education technology, teacher evaluations, and other factors affecting school quality? 2. What are the greatest challenges within the school or classroom expressed by rural educators? How are educators' needs prioritized? 3. Who should be contributing to the discussion on how to create improvements to rural education practices? 4. What resources (money, personnel, school programs, etc.) can be made available or better utilized to improve school quality?
Recruiting and retaining effective teachers and administrators	1. What do current educators cite as the primary factors contributing to recruitment and retention difficulties? 2. Are there incentives that can be used to retain teachers? If so, what are they? 3. What are the current recruiting strategies? How can these be improved? 4. What professional development opportunities are offered? Are these opportunities specifically tailored to rural settings?
Improving technology and digital capacities	1. What are the current technological capacities of the school or district? 2. What factors are inhibiting greater use and expansion of technology in schools? Can these challenges be mitigated? 3. What professional development opportunities are available to improve teachers' technological proficiencies? 4. What is the attitude toward increased technology in the classroom? 5. What community resources can be accessed to increase digital access and literacy?
Effectively evaluating teachers in rural schools	1. What difficulties exist in rural schools with meeting state teacher evaluation requirements? 2. Can additional resources or personnel be made available to school administrators to alleviate the demand of the evaluation process? 3. What training and professional development should accompany new evaluation processes?

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