Supporting RURAL Teachers

By addressing the challenges of teachers and bolstering their performance, rural principals elevate their schools’ achievement.

By Doris Terry-Williams
Nearly a century ago, in Lucy Maude Montgomery’s *Anne of the Islands*, Stella Maynard detailed the frustrations of teaching in a “back country school.” She rather dramatically concluded, “Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make country schoolmarms!” Maynard’s lament reflects many of the current realities of rural school teaching—low pay, multiple preparations, insufficient time for professional growth and planning, and a lack of public will to provide adequate funding. While city educators and “country” educators might argue whose hardships are greater, rural school leaders unquestionably recognize that their greatest challenge today is building, sustaining, and supporting a teacher corps so that schools can operate at high levels. This is especially the case in isolated rural locations and places with high concentrations of children in poverty and children of black, Native American, or non-white Hispanic descent.

Inattention to rural teachers’ concerns in education reform arenas exacerbates the problem. In order for children to succeed in rural schools, school leaders must build strong supports around a bold new agenda to ensure that teachers succeed as well. Some of those supports relate directly to the profession; others are more broadly contextual. Leadership that supports successful practice pays attention to both directly related and contextual supports.

Building an effective teacher corps begins with stellar leadership. Linda Darling-Hammond’s research indicates that successful school leadership attracts effective teachers seeking conditions that allow them to perform at their highest level. The Center for Teaching Quality validates this notion, citing school leadership as a significant factor in teachers’ retention.

Creating the conditions under which teachers can be effective requires strategies and partnerships that address both in-school and out-of-school concerns. Many school leaders view the latter as outside of their area of responsibility, but external factors impact teacher effectiveness in much the same way they impact student learning.

**Developing Place-Based Competency**

Effective leaders recognize that successful practice is not necessarily transportable. What works for one teacher might not work for another, and what works for a teacher in one environment might not work for that same teacher in another environment. The urgency to fill positions from small pools of “highly qualified” applicants often trumps the quest for teachers whose dispositions and competencies match the needs, interests, and gifts of the students and communities they serve. Effective teacher support requires that leaders know what teachers need to succeed with the students they have.

Content knowledge can be gained to a large extent in the preservice classroom. But place-based cultural competency—the ability to function well and respectfully amidst those things that define a people and place and make them unique—is more difficult to teach in a preservice course. Teachers must experience the context they will teach in. To that end, school leaders should connect with higher education programs to immerse prospective teachers in the rural experience and help them build a body of place-specific knowledge and competencies—understanding the ties between an area’s economic history and culture, for instance—that will enable them to succeed in the rural context.

For example, the Ozarks Teacher Corps, a project of the Rural Trust’s Center for Midwestern Initiatives, provides a promising place-based teacher development model. Talented students commit to teaching in their hometowns for at least three years. Although the teachers are from rural Ozarks communities, their preservice programs immerse
them in education issues and internships in small rural schools. They are immersed into rural school culture and participate in a place-based education institute where they learn to collaborate with community partners around standards-based curricula.

Whether teachers are new to the profession or just new to a school or community, they will feel more supported if there is an identifiable set of people and resources with which they can connect for professional and personal needs. This is crucial to addressing rural teachers’ out-of-school concerns such as housing, transportation, and leisure time activities. These resources help reduce the sense of isolation that rural teachers often experience.

Another strategy for supporting rural teachers is addressing more effectively the special needs of children and families. Even in the most distressed communities, school leaders can build partnerships that make wrap-around services accessible with little interruption to the school day. Empty classrooms can be converted into family resource centers, operated largely with Title I funding and parent volunteers. Other spaces and partnerships can be morphed into full-service community school operations. Connecting schools and communities in these ways will reduce the pull on teachers’ time to address non-academic issues, allow more time for teaching and learning, and result in a more satisfying work environment.

Supporting Professional Growth

Teachers also need to be supported in ways that spawn continuous growth and commitment to the profession. High-quality, job-embedded, and real-time professional development, as well as collaboration, leadership opportunities, and voice in decision-making will help reduce teacher turnover. These elements also lessen the negative effects teacher turnover have on student achievement and school budgets.

In a 2007 report to the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Teaching Quality noted that few teachers receive the “intensive, sustained, and content-focused professional development” that leads to increased student achievement. Over the course of a year, only 9 percent of elementary mathematics teachers had more than 24 hours of professional development in mathematics. Only 20 percent of elementary teachers had more than 24 hours of professional development on instructional strategies in reading. The study further noted that U.S. teachers spend on average 30 to 35 hours a week teaching.

By contrast, teachers in high-performing countries such as Finland and Singapore spend 15 to 24 hours a week teaching. The balance of their time is spent in professional development, planning, and collaboration with colleagues. Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (Organizing School for Improvement, 2010) and a host of other researchers and practitioners substantiate the fact that student learning increases in schools where there are reflective, collaborative educator communities focused on teaching and learning.

In spite of deep budget cuts, leaders must find ways to support professional development and collaboration among rural teachers. This will become even more important as schools move to implement Common Core State Standards. Here are examples of some effective and fairly low-cost strategies:

- **Action research**, sometimes called participatory research, is a practitioner-led process of defining and studying immediate problems, developing and testing theories through practice, and implementing the practical knowledge that emerges from the process. It might include a professional researcher but, in the context of teaching, is teacher-led and addresses teachers’ immediate, pressing concerns.

- **Professional learning communities** (PLCs) are variously defined to reflect teachers’ engagement in sustained, collaborative learning and action research to improve their practice and student learning outcomes. PLCs provide an infrastructure for teachers to engage in self-directed learning and intensive examination of student and teacher work products. PLCs are usually comprised of teachers, but may also include administrators and community members.

- **Lesson study** is a professional development process through which teachers examine their practice relative to a specific goal or research question. A group of teachers collaboratively design a lesson or group of lessons based on the selected goal or question. They then observe one teacher’s implementation of the lesson and reconvene to discuss their observations. They might choose to revise the lesson and repeat the process with a different teacher in a different classroom. Finally, they produce a report on what they learned, particularly with respect to their research question. Current technology makes it possible to conduct lesson studies with groups of teachers from different schools and even different districts in virtual communities of practice.

- **Virtual communities of practice** use technology to transcend geographic boundaries and connect people who have a shared purpose or interest. People can assemble at the virtual meeting spot in real time or they
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These strategies all focus on improving teaching outcomes. They provide protocols for collaboration, problem-solving in nearly real time, and the elevation of teacher voice. Teachers at very small schools can use technology so that they can employ these collaborative strategies.

Teacher leadership is essential to the effective exercise of these strategies. School leaders must develop clear pathways and create venues for diverse leadership styles to emerge and flourish. Where teacher leadership is nourished, teacher-leaders extend the arms of the school leader. They will mentor and coach new and struggling teachers as well as innovate, advocate, and solve problems. In a school of any size, teacher-leaders are an invaluable asset.

Finding Financing Support
Children should never have to rely upon philanthropy and competitive grants for access to a high-quality public education. In reality, however, competition is playing a growing role in public school funding. Rural districts are at a distinct disadvantage in this climate as many funders seek to reach large numbers of students by concentrating their resources in urban settings. Small, rural districts are at an even greater disadvantage with fewer resources to develop competitive grant applications.

Becoming more entrepreneurial is essential, especially where adequate and equitable public funding is not forthcoming. This means that school leaders must increase local capacity to develop competitive state, federal, and private donor grant applications. Very small schools and districts should form consortia with other schools and districts for this purpose, and leverage the resources among participants.

The Community Foundation of the Ozarks has a successful entrepreneurial model that builds upon relationships with individuals and families of means to establish substantial local school funds. These funds support teacher professional development and other education-related ventures.

Rural-Specific Strategies
Many of the factors that increase teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction are within the principal’s ability to influence:

**1.** Know your students, families, and communities well enough to understand what teachers need to know and be able to do to help them succeed.

**2.** Seek out teachers whose place-based competencies facilitate their effective engagement with students or provide opportunities for them to develop these competencies.

**3.** Provide job-embedded and real-time opportunities for teachers to improve their practice and connect professionally, observing and co-teaching with others, sharing successful strategies and lessons learned, and visiting other schools.

**4.** Provide opportunities for teachers to build strong, authentic ties with the community through curricula, including place-based learning.

**5.** Provide leadership opportunities and honor teacher voice in decision-making.

**6.** Advocate for teachers, the teaching profession, and public education.

Some factors are outside the leader’s immediate ability to influence and require carefully planned and well-coordinated partnerships. The school leader must be able to:

**1.** Build partnerships that speak to the quality of life concerns of professional educators, including affordable, quality housing, technology access, transportation, and leisure-time activities.

**2.** Develop partnerships that provide students and families the services they need to mitigate the negative out-of-school factors that impact teaching and learning.

**3.** Encourage businesses to give VIP status to teachers, providing discounts on meals, educational materials, and other essentials.

While the challenges addressed in this article are not necessarily unique to rural schools, leaders need to find effective, rural-specific responses to address them. Stella Maynard left her “back country” school even though she confessed that she enjoyed the job. Perhaps a supportive leader could have created the conditions under which she might have decided to stay.

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