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## The Joys and Woes of Leading Rural Schools

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While such movies as *Lean on Me*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers* place a spotlight on the challenges, and eventual rewards, experienced by urban principals, often left out of the conversations about the principalship are the ups and downs faced by leaders of rural schools.

Principals in rural schools are, indeed, doing exceptional work despite the difficulties they must tackle—just take a look at the list of National Distinguished Principals NAESP and the U.S. Department of Education honor every year. Rural school principals are well-represented among the principals recognized for their exceptional work. But what specifically makes their principalship unique?

### What the Data Shows

In 2007, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classified 29,977 public elementary and secondary schools as rural. This constitutes 31.3 percent of all public elementary and secondary schools, with a total of about 10.3 million students.

According to the NCES report, “Status of Education in Rural America,” which evaluated data from the 2003-2004 school year:

- Public schools in rural areas had the greatest difficulty filling vacant teaching positions in the fields of English as a Second Language and foreign languages. In addition, difficulty in filling music or art teaching vacancies was reported by 26.1 percent of rural schools compared with 16.6 percent of urban schools and 16.9 percent of suburban schools.
- There was little variation between the percentage of public school students with an individualized education program (IEP) in rural areas (13 percent) and the percentages in other locales (12 percent to 14 percent) in 2003-2004.
- About 38 percent of principals in rural public schools were currently teaching in addition to serving as principal, compared with 16 percent of urban public school principals and 22 percent of suburban public school principals.
- Greater percentages of students in rural areas than students in cities had parents who attended a school event (74 percent versus 65 percent) or served as a volunteer or on a committee (42 percent versus 38 percent).

### Staffing Challenges

Most cited by the principals interviewed for this article were the struggles they faced in finding and hiring qualified teachers and staff.

Staff shortages in music, arts, and special education are what Nebraska principal David Ludwig says he faces at Wisner-Pilger Elementary and Middle schools. “The quality of applicants isn’t as good as it used to be,” he says. “It’s difficult to get competition for new staff.”

Ludwig’s schools are located nine miles apart, in towns with total populations of 1,500 and 400 people. Omaha is about 90 miles away from the towns of Wisner and Pilger.

Arco Elementary School principal Karen Pyron says the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act in ensuring that teachers are highly qualified is difficult for rural schools. Pyron’s K-5 school is located in Idaho, 200 miles east of Boise. The nearest university, Pyron explains, is 80 to 90 miles away from Arco, which inhibits teachers from easily attending professional development classes.

Principal Bill Jones says his school's budget makes sufficient staffing difficult. "We don't have a lot of extra money to hire additional needed staff," he says. Jones leads South Elementary School in Corbin, Kentucky, a city with a population of about 8,300 people located approximately 90 miles south of Lexington.

To overcome his school's staffing challenge, Jones says, "We do whatever we can to get additional help to the students who need it most." That includes using student teachers from nearby colleges, parent volunteers, and peer tutors from the district's high school.

#### **Special Education**

Even though Ludwig, who also serves as the districtwide special education director, has seen his two schools' populations decline over the years, the special education needs have risen. Autism alone affects six of the 500 students in the district, Ludwig notes. There are five special education teachers in the district, but Ludwig says that providing adequate help to children who require special education is a constant challenge he faces.

Pyron says that 20 percent of her 170 students are on an IEP. "We are not overidentifying," she emphasizes. "They are legitimately on an IEP, from speech and language to learning and emotional disabilities." Arco has one special education teacher for students in grades 2-5 and another special education teacher for her pre-K-1 students. Because of the location of her school, Pyron says, "We do not have access to services that this population of students demands."

#### **Many Roles**

In addition to serving as principal of two schools and the district's special education director, Ludwig also is chair of curriculum assessment, co-chair of school improvement, and supervisor of grades 7-12 evening activities. And, up until two years ago, Ludwig also filled in as bus driver when necessary—which proved to be too often as he had to relieve himself of this duty to spend more time in the school buildings.

"We have to assume many roles and do what we can to keep the function of the school going," Ludwig says.

#### **Real Sense of Community**

With small student, staff, and community populations that are common among rural schools comes a sense of family among school staff, students, and members of the community, as well as a feeling of prominence or celebrity for the principals.

"I am more than the principal of the school," says Jones, whose school comprises 470 students in grades 3-5. "I am looked upon as a leader in our community. Most everyone knows me or something about our school."

"Getting to personally know the community members, businesses, and families is very rewarding," adds New Hampshire principal Steve Kelley. "A strong bond is created that often spans generations." Kelley's school, Inter-Lakes Elementary, has 550 students in grades pre-K-6.

"There's a real connectedness," Ludwig says. "Everything we do, we do as a family. ... You can do that in a rural community."