



Rural Re

Bring opportunity to your school with proven solutions and strategies

By Hobart L. Harmon and Mark D. Wilson

How far is it from eastern Montana to Dubai? Only as far as you want it to be, according to Jule Walker, principal of Plevna School in Plevna, Montana. She decided that attending a small school in a remote area shouldn't be a limiting factor for the students in her community.

"Technology has had a positive impact on our access to experiences," says Walker, who also serves as the superintendent of the school system. "Our students connect with their counterparts across the globe, including learning via Skype with students from Dubai." While there are challenges in being remote and small, Walker chooses to see the opportunities instead.

At Plevna School (81 students, grades K-12), Walker and her team engage in initiatives that larger schools hope to replicate as well. "Right now, the idea in education is to have personalized learning, and we are there," she says. "At Plevna, we make a conscious effort to connect with others and to emphasize lifelong learning."

According to a 2016 report by Scholastic, 99 percent of principals say that working with students is the most satisfying part of their school day. But high percentages of principals work with students who are experiencing family or personal crisis (95 percent), in need of mental health services (91 percent), living in poverty (90 percent), coming to school hungry (85 percent), and in need of health care services (82 percent).

Resources

Despite popular stereotypes, these issues are not confined to urban centers. In fact, one-third of the more than 1,000 principals responding to the Scholastic national survey were in rural areas. About one-fifth were in high-poverty rural areas; more than 40 percent were in midhigh-poverty rural settings. These principals face unique challenges—and are stymied by a lack of research about solutions for these challenges in rural communities.

America's rural principals need solutions, particularly when we consider findings of the most recent national "Why Rural Matters" report published by The Rural School and Community Trust. More than 1 in 4 of America's public schools are rural. Almost 9 million students reside in rural communities. Nearly half are from low-income families; more than 1 in 4 is a child of color. According to the National Rural Education Association's 2016–2021 research agenda, the effects of poverty, parent/family engagement, and school leadership are among the top 10 research priorities in rural education.

In this article, we offer some examples of promising solutions for principal challenges in rural settings.

Developing School Culture

Jon-Erik Jones is the principal of New Quitman County Elementary/Middle School in Georgetown, Georgia. Jones also serves as principal of Quitman County High School. He leads a team that serves the 300-plus students of his community from pre-K through grade 12.

Georgetown is in Quitman County, a small, rural community in southwest Georgia with a population of around 2,500. Despite the small population and limited access to financial resources, Quitman County Schools have developed a culture of learning forward with a mindset on preparation for the future.

Through grants and strategic resource utilization, Quitman County Schools were able to transform one of the smallest schools in the state into one of the most technology-driven. Jones and the team at Quitman foster the use of technology as a part of their school's culture.

Scarce funds, long travel distances to out-of-district professional development opportunities, a lack of substitute teachers, and small school size are serious barriers to robust professional development offerings.



LEARN MORE

Dig into these rural-focused resources for more detail and inspiration.

How to recruit and retain teachers and other leaders in hard-to-staff rural and small school districts.
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513865.pdf>

Rural Math Excel Partnership.
www.ruralmath.com

Rural Math Innovation Network.
www.vaadvstudies.org/rmin

The New Principal Show!
<https://thenewprincipalshow.podbean.com>

Principal Matters! newsletter and blog.
<https://principal-matters.com>

Implementing a 1:1 device initiative, the faculty and staff deeply engage students by using technological resources, creating a culture of exploration and creativity. For Jones' contributions in developing the innovative, creative culture at his school, he was named an Apple Distinguished Educator in 2017.

The commitment to connect Quitman County students to a world of learning via technology helps level the playing field for these rural students through a school culture that embraces creativity and curiosity. An essential component is school leadership. The leaders at Quitman County not only encourage technology use, they also model its application in all of their work, serving as champions for learning and for innovation.

School culture is also key to the success that principal Brooks Mewborn and his team have enjoyed at North Hart Elementary School in rural Georgia. Named a 2016 National Blue Ribbon Lighthouse School, North Hart Elementary derives its success, according to Mewborn, "from focusing heavily on building strong relationships with our students and their families." Those relationships led to a deeper commitment to success and a positive climate for learning.

Mewborn challenged the faculty and students last spring with a promise: If all students met their year-end academic goals, he would ride from North Hart across more than 20 miles of rural landscape to the middle school ... on his bicycle. Students met their goals, and Mewborn made the ride, "although it almost killed me," he says.

Supporting Teacher Development

Recruiting and retaining teachers can be a major challenge for the rural principal. Numerous strategies are being used, such as subsidized housing incentives, student loan forgiveness programs, grow-your-own teacher programs, and mentoring programs. Yet few principals consider the role of professional development in teacher recruiting and retention. According to the Scholastic survey, teachers want effective, ongoing, and relevant professional development. They want professional development on instructional strategies in their subject area(s) and how to incorporate

technology into their lessons, and they want instructional materials.

Scarce funds, long travel distances to out-of-district professional development opportunities, a lack of substitute teachers, and small school size are serious barriers to robust professional development offerings. For example, research reveals that educators who work at schools with fewer than 150 students are significantly less likely than teachers in larger schools to participate in mentoring and coaching, to collaborate regularly with other teachers, and to take college courses.

Solutions are evolving. For example, a school might join a consortium of rural schools or districts to "grow your own" teachers and include supportive professional development offered by the regional education service agency, a regional university, or both in a collaborative partnership approach. Also, a partnership with multiple districts to share expenses and increase the number of elementary or middle school teachers can make more feasible the specific on-site and timely learning opportunities that would be cost-prohibitive for a single district with few teachers in the school or subject.

Rural principals can also take advantage of recent innovations such as virtual networks that give teachers access to educators in like grades or subjects in other districts, rural regions, or states. For example, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education Investing in Education (USED i3) program, middle school and high school Algebra I teachers in 18 rural school systems in Virginia are working in a virtual networked improvement community to innovate solutions to their problems of practice.

Called the Rural Math Innovation Network, it allows innovation-minded teachers to create, test, videotape, and share lessons that focus on strategies that develop student self-efficacy and growth mindset. The lessons also link to student mastery of math competencies performed by STEM-H technicians in the rural region. This effort complements workforce development needs and increases employment opportunities for students who desire to live in their rural area.

Fostering Family Engagement

Few rural communities have the mental health and other social services that are commonly available in urban areas. Travel distance to and from the work location and from home to school may greatly limit parent participation in evening functions held at the school. Rural

schools may feel they must fulfill responsibilities once expected of parents, religious organizations, and other local institutions. Teachers may be overwhelmed with testing accountability, low pay, increasing student populations from impoverished families, and the opioid crisis. And far too many parents and family members may perceive that the school does not welcome them.

Reaching out to parents in meaningful ways will require much more than the annual “open house” event or parent-teacher conference. Ongoing two-way communication using multiple formats that accommodate family schedules and address cultural and language barriers will be necessary. Principals and teachers surveyed by Scholastic selected among 14 activities they felt most important to help families engage with their children’s learning. Only 20 percent selected home visits. But in a rural area, visiting the student’s home may be the best way to demonstrate interest in the student and family, improve communications, and begin a welcoming school-family relationship.

Tricia Langford is the principal of Temple Elementary School, serving a rural community in Carroll County, Georgia. Her school has shown significant success in student achievement, thanks in part to a strategic effort to reach parents.

“We have established a ‘no-excuse’ approach to connecting with parents,” Langford says. “At Temple Elementary, we have made a priority of communicating with parents in a proactive, positive way. Once we build trust, we can begin to share tips and strategies that help the students, but help the parents, too.”

Some principals may need a more formal model of shared responsibility to support student academic success in school. For example, the Rural Math Excel Partnership (RMEP) model encourages teachers, family members, and a team of community and business volunteers to perform specific functions that support student success in foundational math courses. Thanks to the program, developed with support of a USED i3 innovation grant, parents don’t have to help their child do algebra homework. Teachers help parents and students use web-based resources such as Khan Academy videos.

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Parents can participate in a Family Math Night at the school or complete the same family engagement activities with the child on the RMEP website, or follow a blended approach. The team of community volunteers conducts an event for family members and their children that answers why math is important for STEM-H careers. This event also gives students a chance to interview a community resident to learn how math is used in his or her job.

Finding Time for Principal Development

There is no standing still in school leadership. Principals often adopt—in the interest of humility—a “me-last” approach to all resources, including professional growth. This notion is faulty at best. The leader of a learning institution should be the model of what learning looks like. If you adopt that tenet, you’ll be on your way to being a more effective and prepared school leader.

Making the most of limited time is key. The Principal Support Network, established in 2011 primarily to serve rural principals in Georgia, partners with Georgia’s RESAs (Regional Education Service Agencies) to offer a series of “Principal and Assistant Principal Academies.” This strategy makes relevant face-to-face learning opportunities available within a reasonable distance to school leaders in remote rural areas.

Easy-to-get-to regional events, *The New Principal Show!* (a live event recorded for podcast), and the weekly newsletter *Principal Matters!* support growth of principals and assistant principals. A hybrid model of face-to-face cohort work and a myriad of connections among school leaders creates learning opportunities with limited time and money resources.

Solutions for many challenges of rural school leadership are on the horizon. Using technology is part of the solution for fostering school culture, engaging families, and making professional development opportunities accessible for teachers and principals. 

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