Many rural school districts face declining enrollments. A few districts have taken the unusual path of recruiting international students in order to boost their enrollments. This study examines a community using this strategy and the resulting financial, academic, and social situations for the school, community, and students, both local and international. The program has two goals: to increase both enrollment and diversity in the school. The benefits and challenges are discussed in light of the social and academic spheres of the school experience. The future of the program is considered, especially in connection to community fears of school closure or consolidation. Issues of professional development for teachers and programming for students are described. Recommendations for districts considering an international student program are included. This work contributes to a better understanding of the potential synergy between schools and communities.

Key Words: Rural education; Rural schools; Rural administration; Rural education policy; School community connections; International students.

Picture a small rural school within its community. Did you envision a school deeply connected to its community? While schools in all geographic locations are connected to their communities, in rural areas schools are the center, even the heart of their community (Lyson 2002; Peshkin, 1978; Sher, 1977; Theobald, 1997, 2009). Isolation, declining enrollments, and fiscal stress, paired with increasing pressure for higher levels of student achievement, can leave rural school districts feeling like there are few options to remain viable (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Strang, 1987; Strange, 2011; Warner & Lindle, 2009). Nonetheless, a handful of rural districts across the country have found an interesting option: International student programs (Canfield, 2011; Collins, 2001; Winerip, 2011). Reasons why such programs are established differ among the communities as to whether they are initiated to meet fiscal, cultural, or academic needs.

This study examines a community using this strategy and the resulting financial, academic, and social situations for the school, community, and students, both local and international. This work contributes to a better understanding of the potential synergy between schools and communities. This study is centered on the following research questions:

1. Who was involved in the decision-making and implementation process of the international student program in Lakeside?

2. What were the motivating forces and what were the goals of the program?

3. What have been the effects and results (expected and unexpected) on the financial, academic, and cultural experiences of the school, community, and students (local and international)?

Literature Review

The relevant educational research to this project comes from two bodies of literature. First, we briefly review the state of rural schools in light of declining enrollments and the historical and current school and district consolidation efforts. Second, we review the literature on international students in higher education due to the lack of research on international student programs in secondary schools. This literature is relevant to the current study due to the similarity of stated goals behind the recruitment of international students to educational institutions in the United States.

Declining Enrollment and Consolidation in Rural Areas

Over the course of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, many small and especially rural schools and school districts have faced decisions about closure and consolidation (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Theobald &
Many decisions to close and consolidate schools have rested in financial arguments concerned with economies of scale thought to be found in districts and schools serving greater numbers of students (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). Other arguments have focused on the necessity of a particular size of school in order to offer the broad range of educational opportunities children deserve, for example Conant’s mid-20th century pronouncement that schools should have classes with no fewer than 100 children per grade (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Regardless of the arguments used, for a community the loss of a school can be socially and economically troublesome (Lyson, 2002). In particular, Lyson finds that in the smallest communities with schools (population fewer than 500) property values are higher, fewer families are on public assistance, and a greater percentage of people work within their village and therefore have reduced commute times, than in the smallest communities without schools. Decisions about closure and consolidation have not faded into history, with contemporary small schools and districts continuing to consider these paths due to fiscal constraints, as well as legislated incentives and even state mandates of minimum district size (e.g., Maine). In light of historical and current pressures that may result in the loss of schools for small communities, it is necessary to reconsider the role of a school in its community and the ways that schools and communities can work together for mutual benefit.

**International Students and the U.S. Educational System**

As mentioned in the introduction, the stated rationale behind bringing international students into failing rural schools may be to meet fiscal, academic or cultural needs. While little research on this phenomenon exists at the secondary school level because there are so few international student programs, work in higher education, a surprisingly comparable situation, can help shed light on this issue. Colleges and universities recruit international undergraduate and graduate students for similar reasons. The higher education literature on international students focuses on their role to bring money to educational institutions and fill positions as teaching and research assistants, as well as the perceived benefit of diversity that international students contribute to schools.

We know from higher education news that in terms of finances, at the undergraduate level more colleges and universities are enrolling more and more international students, and even paying agents to recruit these students (Redden, 2010; Reisberg, 2012). Reisberg (2012) argues that this may be a simply a revenue issue; universities are making money on these students, and they are paying for external agents rather than devoting funds to services for international students on campus. At the graduate level, many departments and programs would be unable to sustain themselves without international students. Universities depend on these students to fill important teaching and research positions, especially as the number of American doctoral students declines (Committee on Science Engineering and Public Policy, 2005; Ehrenberg, 1992). Particularly in the hard sciences and engineering, international students are responsible for many of the successes and innovations in the departments. As a report from the Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy (COSEPUP) (2005) highlights, “if the flow of these students and scholars were sharply reduced, research and academic work would suffer” (p. 5).

With regard to diversity issues, universities often boast about their global communities and statistics that show how many international students they have. Despite the numbers, the stereotype of the lonely international student is nothing new (Andrade, 2006-2007). It is clear that meaningful interaction does not always occur, as reported in a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Fisher, 2012). In the study, one in three international students reported having no American friends. Another recent article reports on the tensions between American and international students and discrimination against international students (Redden, 2012). The separateness that is reported here has been observed anecdotally at institutions across the country.

The same argument is present in the literature. Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) state “a campus cannot simply recruit a critical mass of international students; it must also intentionally arrange its resources so that international and American students benefit in desired ways from one another’s presence” (p. 225). Similarly, Galloway and Jenkins (2005) conclude with a quote from Pfaffenothe (1997): “If Americans wish to maintain a global presence and global influence, it is time our institutions of higher education think seriously and systematically about what they want to do with their international students” (p. 186). In conjunction with the recruitment of international students comes the question of what educational institutions can and should do to develop an inclusive atmosphere for domestic and international students and staff.

Such concerns extend to the idea of how students and educational staff interact with international students. As Arthur (2004) states, “It is highly
presumptuous to expect faculty, staff and other students to effectively interact with international students without adequate resources and training” (p. 6). Reports of discrimination and concern about how to handle international students reflect a persistent problem; despite the awareness that meaningful and productive interaction among international and domestic students, faculty, and staff can be challenging, universities struggle to create programming to address these concerns (e.g., Fisher, 2012; Redden, 2012). At the same time, these perspectives on international students indicate a tone of using or dealing with international students, for financial, employment or diversity gains, rather than thinking about how best to serve them. This research on higher education is applicable to secondary schools where attention has turned to the recruitment of international students for enrollment (financial) and cultural (diversity) purposes, beyond the scope of more traditional international exchange programs.

Data and Methods

This research was conducted using a mixed methods case study approach of a purposively selected (Patton, 2002) K-12 district, Lakeside School District. Lakeside is a pseudonym assigned to ensure the confidentiality of the district in this case study. This study was conducted as part of a faculty-student summer research project. We worked together through an independent study class in the spring to design the study and in the summer we collected and analyzed the data.

We conducted interviews (n=14) and administered surveys (n=2). All interviews were semi-structured based on interview guides specific to the respondent’s position, for example as a student or teacher. All administrators and all teachers working with high school students were included in the sample, and an open call went out to parents via letter inviting them and their students to be interviewed. We interviewed local students (n=2), an international student (n=1), teachers (n=4), staff and administration (n=4), a school board member (n=1), and parents (n=2). Interview questions asked respondents to report on the history, goals, effects, challenges and future of the international program. Interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Data analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. We analyzed the interview data using both pre-existing and emergent codes. The codes related to the international program as a response to potential consolidation as well as to the goals, effects, reactions, and challenges of the program as a whole. This analysis helped answer our research questions regarding this program initiated as a creative response to declining enrollment and the consequences of implementing such a program.

Quantitative data were collected using surveys administered to international students (n=6), local students (n=18), and teachers (n=18). Surveys were provided to students during study hall in the library. All high school students attending school on the day of our visit had access to the survey, though not all students elected to complete the survey. All teachers present at a staff meeting were issued a survey and given time to complete it. Each survey consisted of thirteen to fifteen questions that respondents answered using a Likert-scale from one to five, with one being disagree and five agree. In addition, three short-answer questions were included on the survey asking the respondent to further explain any of their answers on the questionnaire, as well as to list the most beneficial aspect and the most problematic aspect of the international program.

Context

Lakeside School District is located in a rural (population fewer than 1,000) and isolated community with a very small school-aged population. As we drove through on the main road, we saw one restaurant, one gas pump, the post office, a community beach, a fitness trail through the woods, and the school.

The entirety of the district (pre-K-12) is housed in one building with a pre-K-12 school enrollment of fewer than 100 students and fewer than twenty teachers. Not only is this one location the center of the district but also it is often described as the center of the community. Nearly everyone we spoke with shared this sentiment. One teacher described the school as defining the community: The community is really centered around the school with all the activities and this is what brings people together here. When asked to describe the community, most participants used the word, “family” in their response, for example, it’s like a big family pretty much. Everybody knows each other. You’ll be driving down the road and everybody we’ll be waving at you in the car so everybody knows who you are. It’s great (Student). In an effort to emphasize the communal nature of Lakeside, one teacher went as far as to say in jest that the community is a socialist republic. Very similar responses were shared when we asked the participants to describe the school. Besides being the social hub, the school is also the largest employer in the town.
Less than a decade ago the district found itself with an extremely small K-12 enrollment and, with a new superintendent, came the idea of bringing international students to the high school. The school has worked with multiple agencies to recruit 9th-12th grade students from around the world. To the present day, the program has included fewer than ten students per year but each year has brought additional international students to the school. The international students pay tuition to the school, which has been maintained at a relatively low rate compared to private school tuitions in the U.S. The school district has calculated per pupil expenditures limited to teacher and staff salaries, instructional materials, extracurricular expenses, and food. The tuition rate for international students is a total of this per pupil expense and a stipend for the host families. The international students live in homes throughout the community. International students have lived with families who have children of their own in the school, other community members without school-age children, as well as school staff. The host families receive funds to support food and transportation costs of the international students. The community as a whole seems eager to house the international students, as they believe without this program their school may be closed. However, as the program continues and expands it has become increasingly challenging to find host families because of the small local population.

The international students, restricted by their visas, stay for only one year. Students come on either F-1 or J-1 visas. In the first years of the program, students generally came to Lakeside holding F-1 visas - visas that are specifically geared towards cultural exchange. The students coming to the U.S. holding such visas come for the cultural immersion experience, not necessarily for an academic purpose. Without the academic drive it was difficult to keep these students motivated so Lakeside began accepting students holding J-1 visas, which are designed for an educational experience (The basics on U.S. visas, 2009). However, regardless if international students hold the F-1 or J-1 visa, they can only stay at a public school like Lakeside for one year.

The community has a large seasonal population with many of the houses being second homes. This, along with a unique revenue source from the state, makes Lakeside more financially stable than surrounding districts, especially in light of recent fiscal challenges in most regions. (Please note we have chosen to allude to this unique financial situation of Lakeside because it creates an unusual context for a small rural district; however, we cannot further explain the revenue source without the risk of exposing the identity of the district.) This additional funding source allows the school to provide unique experiences for the students. For example, every year the students take a trek funded by the school, and the destination alternates year to year between a city and a remote wilderness location. These trips exemplify how the school is committed to providing the students diverse experiences in communities different than their own, which is parallel to a goal of the international program.

Findings

The findings of our study are presented in this section under several headings. We begin by responding to our research questions by illustrating the goals of the program, as described by our respondents. Additionally, we describe the effects of the program on the school, including both the benefits and obstacles that the international student program brings to the classrooms, as well as to the students’ social lives. Next, we describe the hopes and concerns about the future of the program. This section details the local sense of the inevitability of growth, which is countered by a strong belief that the international student population should never outnumber the local student enrollment. With the small numbers of local students, this is very real possibility as the program grows. Following these three sections, we address several themes that emerged in our work beyond our research questions. We describe the strong fear of closure and consolidation that we heard about from administrators, teachers, parents and students. This fear, we found, in many ways is a motivation for the continuation of the program. We also heard a degree of resentment from students described by adults who had observed examples of resentment from their students. Finally, we comment on the absence of related professional development for teachers in the final part of the findings section.

Goals of the International Student Program

The goal of the Lakeside international student program is two-fold: to increase the population of the school (directly and indirectly) and to diversify the student body. Rural areas of the United States have less diverse populations than their suburban and urban counterparts with an average of 78% white students in public K-12 schools.

---

1 Lakeside is a pseudonym assigned to ensure the confidentiality of the district in this case study.
This percentage grows as isolation and distance from centers of population increase with 74% white students in rural fringe and 83% in distant rural areas. Rural communities vary broadly with many having extremely fast growing minority populations, due in part to an influx of workers for farms and industry. Nonetheless, on average isolated rural communities are not as diverse as other regions, and classrooms lacking diversity may affect students in a variety of ways. The descriptions of the origins of the program stem from a motivation to increase the enrollment of the school, as well as to expose the student body to cultures they would not otherwise have access to in their home community. As mentioned previously, the treks each year are another way that the administration and teachers strive to expose the students to new experiences. The marriage of these two goals (enrollment and diversity) is a significant part of the reason the program draws the support of the administration, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Most respondents mentioned each of these goals but many struggled to name one as the primary goal. For example a student said: *I am not really sure what the actual goal is...it is to keep the school from being shut down.* A staff member shared: *number one to help with our declining numbers.* A teacher avoided naming a single goal for the program by listing a series of potential goals from her perspective: *I don't know if the one goal is to increase enrollment and to keep the school open...[Or] if the one goal is to create such a unique small little school that nobody would shut it down.* And another teacher said simply: *The real goal of the program is to increase enrollment.* The fear of school closure and consolidation are evident in these passages, but importantly, each respondent followed these comments with additional descriptions of the program as a way to increase the diversity of experiences, socially and academically.

Students noted that the goal of the international student program is to expose them to other cultures. According to one the goal is to *teach each culture about the different cultures.* And another noted: *I think [the program] makes the local students, since [the school] is so small, makes [the students] have more variety and have people to talk to. And to be more open-minded to the world because [we're] so isolated.* A staff member echoed these ideas of cultural exchange and exposure as the second main goal of the program: *Number two, to help with diversity so that our kids, so when they get out into college or wherever they're going, don't come across a student for the first time that speaks a different language and they don't know how to relate to them.*

And a Board of Education member added that the community also benefits from the diversity: *There is essentially no diversity in this town at all. It would be good for our students. It would be good for the community to have different people from different walks of life and different countries visiting us and living with us.* The students and the community feel the benefits of increasing the enrollment and bringing students from different cultures to the school.

We note that academic achievement was never mentioned as a goal of the program, although teachers and staff mentioned it as an unintended consequence. For example, a teacher mentioned that the diversity the program brings affects the educational goals of the school: *I think we enjoy the cultural exchange. We like it a lot. So I guess that adds to the enrichment, to the whole educational process here.* A member of the Board of Education emphasized the academic benefit as well: *I mentioned the cultural diversity but also, getting our own students in town here to strive and move forward academically in their own classrooms. Most of them from grades pre-K all the way through, they were the same students every year and some of them were not being motivated and we thought by bringing these other students in we could help motivate our own students and help to strive academically.* Although academic enrichment is not mentioned as a primary goal of the international student program at Lakeside, it appears to be noted as an effect by some respondents.

**Effects of the International Program on the School: Benefits and Challenges**

The effects of this program range widely from social to academic benefits and from enrollment increases to staffing and classroom challenges. The social benefits of this program stem from the cultural exchange it allows, as well as from the increased enrollment in a small school where students are used to having the same students in their classes from pre-K to 12th grade. A staff member described the social benefits: *It gives more kids more social opportunities...They have to step out of the box and say, ‘Oh, ok, this is how I need to relate to this person to be able to be their friend.’* The program has also created a dating scene among the students who often have reported feeling too much like brothers and sisters to want to date one another by the time they are in high school. One staff member explained: *[For] some kids, like the boys who got girlfriends this year, [the program] is awesome.* And for one student in particular who will be traveling to his girlfriend’s home country over the summer, a teacher commented: *For him, he’s bloomed. He’s going to
France in a couple of weeks and at the beginning of the year that wasn’t anywhere in his view of what he might be doing with his summer, you know, nowhere in the realm of the possible or imagined. It’s wonderful in that regard, it’s really wonderful, that kind of transformation. Overall, on the survey local students report being friends with international students (94%) and that the program has improved their view of people from different cultures (78%). Teachers and students noted the social benefits of cultural exchange and challenges of welcoming new students to the school.

There are also academic benefits of the program. Students enjoy what the cultural exchange can bring to the classroom experience. I think it’s really cool, like in social studies class we are talking about different cultures and different countries and stuff and sometimes we’re talking about [a place from] where we have a foreign exchange student. It’s cool because they can be there and tell us all these things. Another student reported a similar experience: For example, in history class and social studies, you have different views on what happened. For examples, if we study the Vietnam War or World War II [we see] the way we study it and the way they study it. Teachers also see academic benefits to the program. For one teacher the international program has altered his teaching: I’ve taught in a more in-depth, more challenging, more demanding [way] and I believe it’s really paid off. The kids have really stepped up this year.

In addition, teachers and staff report an overall increase in expectations and the academic culture in the school due to the international students, or at least they hope to see this effect on the local students. A staff member noted: This year we have some brilliant international students, that I don’t know, it doesn’t seem to really raise the bar for everyone, but I think eventually. Another staff member echoed this hope that the academic environment will be improved by the presence of other students: There is also the academic side of it, competitiveness that we don’t have at [Lakeside] because when you are in a class of four or five nobody really cares, to be valedictorian or salutatorian, they don’t really care. But when you have a little competition and someone is really working hard to get really good grades…I think that’s healthy.

The cultural benefits to the program are numerous and were reported by students, teachers, and parents in the form of stories. For example, a student described a trip to the ice cream parlor with an international friend: On the way back we hit a turtle with the car, it was fine, but we were talking about it in the hallway this morning and one of the students from Vietnam goes, ‘In our country we eat turtles.’ And we just kind of stood there and stared for a second and were like, ‘What? Why do you eat turtles’. This exposure to cultural difference and the realization that things we may find unusual in the U.S. may be normal elsewhere is a powerful education for both the children and adults in Lakeside. A staff member reported shock and a deeper understanding of the role of religion in the students’ lives after watching international students practice the fasting associated with Ramadan. These are examples of the cultural exchange made possible by this international student program.

Most teachers and students mentioned the academic challenge of having English-language learners (ELL) in their classroom. For example, a student reported: In the classroom environment, I don’t really feel they add that much. In fact, a lot of the time they slow things down with the language barrier between everybody and the teachers, especially. So a lot of the time they have to explain things slowly or have another student explain something to them, which I think takes away from the class time. Another teacher told us that she will have to alter her assignments or grading methods due to the ELL students’ writing abilities. In survey responses, 39% of students answered agree or strongly agree that international students improve their learning in class and 33% feel that students speaking other languages positively affected their classroom learning. None of the teachers strongly agreed with either statement. Thirty-nine percent of teachers agreed, though not strongly, that international students improve classroom learning and 22% agreed that students speaking other languages positively affect classroom learning. We note that while part-time staff was hired to assist the international students struggling with language, there was no professional development for the high school teachers related to this program.

The community has also been affected by the program. On the survey, 72% of local students and teachers felt that international students positively affect the community as a whole. One student described the impact of having the international students in the community: I think they add a lot to the community. It really opens people’s eyes to other cultures and that America isn’t the only country on earth. A teacher mentioned the welcoming reception the community has offered the international students: I think the community almost sees these new students as their new children, as well. They are just so welcoming. Everybody wants to meet them.

An unexpected effect of this program has been an increase in enrollment at Lakeside by students from surrounding districts. A few respondents noted that drawing students away from other districts has
left Lakeside as the only district with an increasing enrollment in the area. A teacher noted that while surrounding districts are not entirely happy with the program at Lakeside, they are interested in learning more about it. *Surrounding districts are losing students to Lakeside, so I am not sure how positive they see this. But they certainly see what’s happening here.* A lot of them have inquired with our superintendent and had him visit their schools.

Another teacher described the appeal that Lakeside has for parents in other districts: *If you’re a parent and you’re 20, 30 miles away, and you go out of your way to get your kid up here, especially in the wintertime, there’s got to be something good happening. Word is getting out, students that aren’t doing that well in some of the [surrounding] schools, they’re coming here so they don’t fall through the cracks, so there aren’t those discipline issues.* And one respondent noted the difficult balance between a narrow approach to increase the Lakeside enrollment and the need for a broader approach where multiple communities work together to maintain the viability of the entire region.

**Future of the Program in Lakeside**

The future of the program is described in various ways by respondents, with many emphasizing the need for growth and the benefits of diversity. Others tempered their enthusiasm for growth with concerns about challenges in the classroom, potential loss of a family-like atmosphere, and the ramifications of a larger population of international than local students.

Some people predict that a large increase of enrollment will have a huge positive economic and social impact on the town. One staff member explained the potential effects of continuing to expand the enrollment of the school on the progress of the community: *I had this fantasy that [Lakeside] is going to be … this Mecca of a cool little college town maybe we’ll have cafes and a store or something. Um, you know I hope. That’s kind of like best-case scenario. People like really coming here and having a college mentality and having the [Lakeside] kids really be notched up and, I mean, that would be awesome. And who knows?* Others are nervous about the implications of perhaps diluting the family-feel that is so vital to the identity of Lakeside. When talking about this potential one teacher stated, *How many kids do we have to recruit to avoid the threat [of closure]? The other question is how big we can get before we lose that sense of being close and related. Scary thought that we’d get so big that we wouldn’t be that small [Lakeside] any more. Some community members think that it is too large already, I think it’s a little bit big now, because right now the international students are about one third of our high school. Which is a lot. There are more international students graduating in the class this year than there are local students. Which I think is a problem.* Based on survey responses only 44% of teachers along with 61% of local students want the program to grow. Despite these numbers, through our interviews, we learned that most of the people who we interviewed expect expansion in the program’s future.

Two issues directly related to the potential of expanding the international student program in Lakeside are housing and visas. Currently the international students are housed by local families and while most report having good experiences, there are also challenges as one teacher described: *The only thing that has become a problem is finding homes for the students. We’re a very limited community, you know, there are not a lot of homes here. So a lot of the people, like we’ve hosted three. My family has hosted three students. And you know it’s not an easy thing…It’s like having a new child, more attention to preparing meals and making sure they get where they need to. That’s the difficult [part], the sacrifices you make. Finding families that are willing to make that sacrifice is becoming more and more difficult.* The community struggles to accommodate the current number of international students and with the same families hosting year after year the housing situation is not sustainable and cannot support the expansion of the program. There is a discussion within the school and community about the possibility of building a dormitory. In this vision, the dormitory could be home to approximately fifty students, both international and out-of district students. The dormitory may also be beneficial by creating jobs for community members, as the students would need dormitory parents and security; additionally, a dormitory would increase the food service and janitorial needs of the school. However, some members of the community are nervous about having such a large number of students from outside of Lakeside.

Another aspect that could have a large impact on the program is a potential change in visa regulations. Currently an international student attending a public school in the U.S. can only hold a J-1 or F-1 visa for one year; however, a bill has been introduced to the U.S. Congress to alter that parameter so that international students could stay for longer. A Lakeside teacher saw this as directly related to the international student program: *Looping is the next step. It is hard with the international students being new every year.* By looping, this teacher was referring to the opportunity to teach the same
students, international students in particular, over multiple years.

Currently, despite only attending for one year, the international students come to Lakeside with the intention of graduating. This is concerning as the local students have been in the pubic high school for four years to earn their degree. A teacher described to us some resentment that the local students have:

*They’re going to graduate? Walk down the aisle? They’ve only been here for one year!*

**Fear of Closure and Consolidation**

We found interesting that the perceived threat of closure or consolidation was a motivating force to this program. Staff, teachers, parents, and students each mentioned enrollment as a goal for the program and the need for the program to continue and expand in the future in order to keep the school open and the community viable.

A teacher who is also a local resident succinctly summarized his support of the program: *I’m kind of biased here because this is where I live, this is where I work, and it all kind of depends on enrollment, so you know, I’m 100% in favor of the international student program.* A parent continued in this vein: *The greater community should be very appreciative of the program due to the fact that their kids still have a school to go to.* And a Board of Education member remarked: *If we can keep our international program bring students in, I think we’ll prosper by keeping the program going.*

An underlying theme in our conversations and in our own understanding of consolidations in Lakeside’s state, leads us to question how likely a consolidation or closure is for the school and community. A consolidation feasibility study was conducted for the area in the last twenty years and since then no closures or consolidations have occurred. The distance between communities, the challenging road conditions, the long and difficult winters, as well as the local communities’ allegiance to their schools are a few of the reasons mentioned by our respondents as to why the school has not had to close. Nonetheless, we observe a sense of devotion to the international student program that comes from a strong feeling of need and reliance on the program to maintain the viability of the school, and in turn the community. This reliance on this program could serve to silence discussion of the challenges faced by teachers and students. Although we did not currently see a struggling or ineffective program, we have a concern with the potential complacency that could develop allowing even an ineffective program to continue as long as it continued to increase the enrollment.

**Resentment**

Along with the social benefits of the cultural exchange, Lakeside also experienced some social challenges. Firstly, there have been difficulties when more than two students from the same country attend Lakeside simultaneously. One staff member noted that, *this year it’s been weird because we’ve had three Russian students and three French students and you know they’ve kind of clumped together and they haven’t really been forced to make other friends.* One student explained to us: *some of the groups of international students just stick to themselves and don’t necessarily socialize with anybody. They’re very closed.* The student balanced this statement by also saying, *some students make friends with everyone right away, which is very nice.* As seen in recent reports in higher education contexts, tensions around issues of making friends and interacting across groups are commonplace.

Other social challenges arise when local students are resentful of the international student program. The community believes the program is necessary for the survival of the school, and consequently the town as a whole, and so there is a lot of importance placed on the international students. One student complained: *No, I’m not saying that the international students are like more important... but, nobody ever talks about us. So we’re just kind of here, like hosts, I guess. Like to make them feel welcome.* And one parent told us, *they have really been told that these other kids are really, really important. And they are here to save our poor unworthy group of kids.* This serious concern is not shared by all parents and students, but worth noting. The administration noted that they have learned how to shape events like a fall potluck dinner that was once a celebration of the international students and is now a welcome back event for all students and families. The attention that they initially placed on the international students was better received when it was a shared event for all the students, including those from the community, surrounding communities, and other countries.

Due to this unique program, a lot of newspaper reporters have come to visit the school and to study the international students. This has left the local students feeling like second-class citizens in their own town. One staff member told us, in response to all the school visitors, *some kids I heard them say, ‘it’s like being in a zoo, we are on display’ and then most of the time they just talk to the international kids anyway and don’t talk to the kids who are here, who live here.* Some staff members predict this resentment will be short-lived. They envision that when the younger students, who grow up in the district and are
always used to having international students in the school, become high school students they will see the program and its effects as the norm and will not have feelings of resentment.

**Programming and Professional Development**

The international program at Lakeside is supported by the current teachers and staff, but we note that there have been few changes in the school structure and practices based on the program, including limited hiring of staff associated with the program, professional development for teachers, and programming for students. Teachers reported few professional development opportunities related to working with international and cultural diverse students. A staff member said in regard to professional development: *There does not really appear to be much support in that area.* When asked about professional development one teacher reported: *Nothing specific. We have hired a few staff members that do English as a Second Language and to deal with any problems that we encounter in the classroom.* Another teacher after having described the need for programming for the students responded to a question about professional development with these words: *I don't think so but that's an interesting question. It never even occurred to me that as staff we could benefit from professional development, even if it's not necessary language related, but how to broker with the divides that tend to happen in a situation like this. How do we broker with those, and how do we grow ourselves?* As mentioned in the literature review, higher education administrators also grapple with these issues.

We were told that one or two years of the program included a diversity course for students, but currently there is no programming for students, international or local, to consciously or academically approach issues of cultural difference or other aspects of diversity. One staff member hesitated when asked about programming for students by wondering why it would be necessary when they *have the real thing,* meaning the presence of students different from the local students. In regard to programming of the students, a teacher stated: *I think that's the greatest difficulty and the thing we've neglected...I don't think we've figured out how to structure within this program opportunities for intentional learning about one another.* A description of a social scene begs some awareness of cultural differences for one teacher: *I walk in the library and I see the Asian kids and the Middle Eastern kids sitting over here, quiet, studying, studious, and the European descended and the European kids sitting here chatting and connecting and I say 'ugh'...At some level, yes, kids are going to fall where their comfort zone is. But as educators and as people who are pursuing this unique educational model, I feel that we have a challenge and a responsibility. The power of cultural experiences for students and teachers alike may be magnified through intentional educational practices such as professional development for teachers and programming for students. Such issues reflect what has been reported in the literature on international students in higher education; tensions exist, and thoughtful and deliberate programming would be useful.*

**Recommendations for Other Communities**

There were a number of areas that the respondents in Lakeside mentioned when asked what they could recommend to other communities considering an international student program. Most often they spoke about the ratio of local students to international students, the language ability of the international students, the housing for international students, and the support of the community for the program.

In regard to the number of students, very few respondents would give a precise number or percentage of the student body that the international student would ideally comprise. Many teachers and staff felt the current ratio is good (approximately 1 international student to 3 local students) and allowed for cultural exchange but did not make the local students feel out numbered in their own school. In addition, the classrooms currently are set up for very small classes and the teachers’ loads include 7-12th grade teaching assignments. With additional students, local or international, the classroom layouts and teaching assignments would have to change. Finally, the small size leads to descriptions of the school as a family and to comments about the safety of a place where students do not fall through the cracks. It is a tough balance to strike between the small size that allows these strengths with a growth rate through international and out-of-district recruitment that maintains the viability of the school.

Teachers, staff, and administration strongly emphasize the importance of considering international students’ language abilities in connection with the development and implementation of an international student program. The success of the program is dependent on their language abilities to allow for positive social and academic experiences. Lakeside found greater success in this area when it welcomed students with J-1 instead of F-1 visas. In addition, the program administrators found it necessary to work only with agencies that would share English language ability test scores or that had
strict score minimums to guarantee Lakeside would enroll students with the necessary English fluency to allow for social and academic success. Finally, students, teachers, and staff reported positive experiences with fewer students from each individual country. There are fewer opportunities for students to speak their home languages if there are fewer students from the same country and the emphasis on communication in English seems to improve classroom and social experiences for both local and international students.

The housing and community support are connected because the program cannot exist without broad local support and the international students cannot find homes unless local families are willing to open their doors. As an administrator noted, You’ll never grow a school through the methods we have without community approval. This community approval has grown through the implementation of events that bring the school and the community together with an emphasis on all the children, not just those who hail from various countries around the world.

Conclusion

This study of Lakeside provides a window through which to view the implementation of an international student program in a public high school setting. It is evident that there are a range of benefits and challenges associated with the program for the school and community. The benefits include increased social opportunities for students who otherwise progress through school with a very small peer group. In addition, the exposure to different cultural backgrounds benefits both international and domestic students. This increased cultural awareness occurs in both social and academic settings. Students and teachers alike commented on the benefit of international student perspectives in history classes, for example. In addition, students and teachers spoke about the social challenges associated with international students who befriended one another more than the domestic students, especially in cases where multiple international students shared a home country. Academic challenges described by teachers, students, and staff are related to the English language ability of the international students. This range of benefits may be enhanced and the challenges minimized by a number of suggestions described by the participants. Screening of international students’ language abilities could alleviate the English language challenges in classrooms. In addition, professional development for teachers and focused academic or social programming for students may improve the social and cultural interactions. In regard to the community, the program appears to ease the fears of school closure and consolidation that are prevalent among community members. The future of the program is often framed from this perspective of a strong belief that the community’s well being is dependent on the school’s presence.

The dual goals of the program, including enrollment increases and cultural diversity, relate directly to the literature on international students in higher education. These tensions between resources, in this case enrollment, and cultural diversity are evident in higher education and in the high school example of Lakeside. In both contexts there is a perception that international students are needed for revenue, enrollment, and stability, and that they also contribute to the educational environment because of the diversity they bring. But in higher education in general, and at Lakeside in particular, little has been done to implement programming that could contribute to the educational benefits of having an international student body, either in teacher or student training. One explanation could be that resources really are an issue; in a school already concerned about finances, which is bringing in students to improve the financial situation, using resources for programming to help those students and the communities they are entering may seem challenging. At the same time, such programming may be the key to maximizing the benefits of international programs in the future.

References


Strange, M. (2011). Finding fairness for rural students: One-third of American children attend school in rural or small towns, but we overlook their needs and fund their schools poorly. Phi Delta Kappan, 92(6), 8.


About the Authors:
Hope G. Casto, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Education Studies Department at Skidmore College. Alexandra Steinhauser is a student in the class of 2013 at Skidmore College. Pamela M. Pollock, PhD, is an Instructional Specialist for International Teaching Fellows at the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.
Standing in the Gap: Research that Informs Strategies for Motivating and Retaining Rural High School Students

Patricia L. Hardré
University of Oklahoma

Rural schools face the challenges of motivating and retaining students, often in the face of severe resource constraints. This paper synthesizes fifteen years of the author’s rural research on secondary students’ school-related motivation, distilling it into strategic principles for rural teachers and administrators. Effective motivational knowledge and strategies supported by both theory and research can help school staff fill the gap between potential and actual student achievement. Multi-level strategies for motivating individuals and groups include elements of classroom instructional practice, interpersonal relationships, and the broader school motivational climate including policy. By motivating students effectively, teachers and administrators can bridge the gap between what students do achieve and what they could achieve.

Key Words: student motivation, student achievement, student retention, school climate

Thinking and feeling, wanting and learning, seeking and knowing are closely integrated within the human brain and psyche (Dai & Sternberg, 2004; Imordino-Yang & Faeth, 2010). Students’ motivations for learning, development, achievement and ongoing education are tied to their individual differences and perceptions, family values and expectations, community and social values, school culture and teaching practice (Anderman & Anderman, 2010; Stipek, 2002). School-related motivation influences students’ choices and actions both present and future, as motivation and experiences in school impact choice of college, careers and lifelong learning (Mook, 1996; Stipek, 2002).

Yet a gap remains between what rural students are doing, learning and achieving, and what their teachers believe they could achieve with adequate educational motivation (Hardré & Sullivan, 2009). Their lack of motivation leads to disengagement and dropout from school and educational pursuits, a pervasive issue, more prevalent in rural than in non-rural schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Standing in that gap requires identifying and using effective motivational strategies, tested and proven in rural schools for rural students, by rural teachers and administrators.

Defining “Rural”

Whenever we address rural needs, we must explicitly define what we mean by “rural” (Hardré & Hennessey, 2010). Defining rurality is not just about size or location but about place-based issues, economics, culture and values (Howley & Howley, 2010). The body of work synthesized in this paper studied the motivational environment and dynamic in US rural secondary schools. These schools were defined as rural based primarily on their geographic location in small communities (low population density), remote from large metropolitan areas (geographic isolation), where the local industry was tied to place (largely agriculture/place-based economy). As a result of community characteristics, the schools were also relatively small in size and had limited resources (small school size) and most area families’ incomes were well below state and national averages earned (low-SES). This profile of rural communities and schools is consistent with federal and state data for these areas (Brown & Swanson, 2003).

Physical versus Motivational Dropout

There are two kinds of dropout that characterize students’ loss of interest and achievement in school: physical dropout (actually leaving school) and motivational dropout (staying in school without interest or effort) (Hardré, 2007). Much political and media attention is given to physical dropout, to students leaving school before completion for alternative economic and social pursuits (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano & Hawkins, 2000). However, little attention is given to its precursor, motivational dropout, in which student remain in school but disengage from academic work (Hardré, 2008). Motivational dropout, state or trait amotivation, is a huge potential threat to student success and a drain on teacher time and other school resources, yet it remains unacknowledged as students stay enrolled and blend into the institutional landscape (Hardré, 2009). Focused attention to strategies for motivating students can effectively promote current engagement and achievement and also reduce motivational dropout that can lead to physical high school dropout. Motivation may, even
beyond ability and curriculum, present the most important educational challenge of this century (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

**Making Strategies Fit in Rural Settings**

One rural teacher said that placing general school research and theory into rural schools can be like seeing some functional item (a lamp, an appliance, a chair) in a store and liking it there, but bringing it home and hating it. Another said that bringing home what she learns from professional development and conferences to the rural school involves so many adaptations it’s like trying to cram it into a place where it won’t ever fit. Rural teachers often experience frustration in trying to bring ideas from well-intentioned general professional development home, only to be frustrated and disappointed with their lack of fit for their rural students.

This paper is a synthesis of my own fifteen-year record of motivation research in rural schools (1998-2012), synthesizing motivational theory for teachers and making sense of it in the context of rural education and community. It is written in response to two calls for action: teachers’ requests for help in motivating their students, and the more general call for translating research into practice. First and primary is the repeated requests of teachers across these studies for help, for usable information on what motivating strategies work for rural students like their own, and for motivating strategies that fit rural needs. Second is the pervasive need for attention to what Ernest Boyer (1990) called the scholarship of application and integration. Boyer called for researchers to make sense of research for practitioners, to translate more abstract findings into principles and strategies that directly inform teaching and school policy.

Thus, this paper is not a comprehensive literature review, but rather the synthesis of a particular, focused body of work and translation into principles for educational policy and practice. In framing this synthesis I have intentionally placed the teachers’ voices first, beginning with the teachers’ productive perceptions and effective practice, then followed with theory that supports and informs them, integrating research and practice by explicitly placing strategic practice up-front.

**Not Only If but Also How Students are Motivated**

Rural teachers tend to overestimate students’ motivation, compared with students’ own parallel reporting (Hardré, 2011). The importance of rural teachers’ perceptions of their students’ motivation drives their efforts to motivate and where they focus their energy and concern (Hardré, 2010; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008b). Yet many rural teachers across studies admit that they lack the knowledge and skill to motivate their students (Hardré & Sullivan, 2009). Some feel able to identify whether student are unmotivated, but not why (Hardré, 2010).

Teachers who are able to identify the causes of students’ lack of motivation tend to use strategies consistent with those causal beliefs (Hardré, 2007). For example, if teachers believe that students are unmotivated because they don’t see the content as personally relevant, they tend to include examples of its relevance. Similarly, if teachers believe that school-based skills are disconnected from students’ career goals and future aspirations, they tend to work at showing students how skills can fit for them. However, when teachers are confronted with diverse and contrastive needs, such a direct correspondence of strategies is more difficult and a sense of helplessness is common (Hardré & Sullivan, 2009). Rural teachers need to know how to identify both if and why students are unmotivated to work and learn in school. To address the needs they see, teachers also need to be equipped with a range of effective motivating strategies that fit their students’ needs and context.

**Achievement ≠ Motivation**

Many teachers tend to equate achievement with motivation, assuming that students achieving well in school are not in danger of motivational deficits (Hardré, 2008; Stipek, 2002). However, the specific perceptions that predict effort and engagement are often different from those that predict success and achievement (Hardré & Hennessey, 2010; Hardré, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). Further, even high achievers may be doing well but not achieving at full ability, and historically high achievers may suffer from anxiety about failure and social pressure to perform at higher levels of challenge (Stipek, 2002; Meece, Wigfield & Eccles, 1990). Such anxiety and pressure threatens positive motivation and success, as it positions high achievers to fake or fail (Colangelo, Assouline & New, 1999). This is a danger exacerbated by teachers overlooking the warning signs because those students have always done well. Even a history of high achievement, without motivation to learn that causes them to engage and persist, will not ensure students’ future achievement (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Conversely students lower in achievement are not necessarily less motivated. Factors such as

---

2 These are unpublished statements from the data collected for previously published studies cited here.
learning-focused (vs. performance-focused) goals and teacher support of autonomy and competence influence effort and engagement in school independent of achievement (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008a). These findings underscore that it is more than grades that keep students working and trying. For rural students, apart from their own past achievement, teachers’ support of their choices predicts self-determined motivation and competence, and intentions to stay in school instead of drop out (Hardré & Reeve, 2003). Rural teachers need to recognize what assets students bring to school, but not equate them too globally. They need to understand that enhancing motivation can improve achievement for any student, because it functions beyond ability and past achievement to fuel future effort and achievement. Focusing on achievement does not always improve motivation, but focusing on motivation does promote achievement. Supporting personal motivation to learn (not just make grades or do well on tests) can bridge the gap for underachieving students and support future success.

**Short-term versus Long-term Strategies**

One rural teacher wisely pointed out that given limited time and other resources, teachers can only do so much and have to pick their battles strategically. This being true, it is critical that they know and choose the most effective strategies for motivating, with lasting benefits. Yet most teachers report using content-relevant and short-term strategies rather than internal and long-term motivating strategies (Hardré, 2011). Attention to strategies to internalize motivation can be much more lasting (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and linking to long-term goals make sense for secondary students in particular. While elementary students are developmentally and socially focused on very short-term goals, secondary students are becoming aware of and attending to longer-term goals, future-oriented perceived selves and choices (e.g., high school majors or emphasis areas, college and career goals) (Berk, 2004).

A previous synthesis of rural teachers’ best practices identified four most effective strategies to motivating rural students: 1) support learning and future goals; 2) make content relevant and connect to students’ interests; 3) respect and treat students as uniquely valued individuals; and 4) foster valuing and perceived competence (Hardré, Sullivan & Roberts, 2008). These strategies have been supported by subsequent rural research as well. Rural teachers have found a core set of strategies very effective, and these strategies address key components of some solid motivational research. The first two sets of strategies (supporting learning and future goals and making content relevant) are consistent with achievement goal theory (Elliot & Dweck, 1988). These theories frame motivation with regard to how desires and aspirations (of both person and context) shape action and intentions; that is, how what we value shapes what we choose to do. The second two sets (showing respect and fostering valuing and competence) are consistent with the development of competence for self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). These theories frame motivation in terms of what students can do or become, based on productive self-beliefs supported by the freedom and encouragement to try.

**What Limits Students’ Motivation?**

When asked about what hampers student motivation, many rural teachers point to home problems, and the resource and social deficits that are common in many rural places (Hardré, 2010; Hardré & Sullivan, 2009). Teachers seeing these negative influences frequently use a climate of interpersonal support and relatedness at school, to compensate for a lack of motivational support for education coming from parents and the larger community context. These strategies are effective, because (beyond curriculum, content and external opportunity), the classroom climate that teachers and administrators create has critical effects on students’ perceptions of their personal ability, the utility and meaningfulness of the content, and their achievement goals which determine how hard they work at learning (Hardré, Crowson, DeBacker & White, 2007). Teachers’ attention to supportive climate and interpersonal relatedness is also consistent with developing self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), based on the understanding that every person has the three basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, and that providing an autonomy-supportive climate for learning enhances students’ development of competence and investment of effort.

Teachers’ own cultural and individual differences, as well as personality and interpersonal style influence how they relate to students and to the content that they teach (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008b). Teachers have contrasting beliefs about whether motivation is their responsibility or the student’s, and about how much difference their efforts can make in students’ motivation (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008b). Teachers’ beliefs, perceptions, efforts, and success or failure experiences interact dynamically to support efficacy and renewed efforts, or to produce learned helplessness and giving up. Teachers need to know that rural secondary students attend and respond to their teachers as source of motivational information and modeling, more strongly than to their peers.
Motivation is Complex but Manageable

Rural students in different areas respond differently to elements of teachers’ motivating and teaching strategies (Hardré & Hennesey, 2010), underscoring the importance of teachers accurately assessing and addressing their students’ unique needs. Teachers need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to identify the strength, quality and causes of students’ motivation with strategies to intervene where gaps are apparent (Hardré, 2010).

Motivation functions at both global and subject-specific levels. For example, as the same student might say, “I’m pretty smart and do well in school,” but also “I just don’t get math” or “I don’t see the point of history.” Across multiple studies, rural high school students reported lower motivation and competence for math and science than for other subjects (Hardré, 2010; Hardré, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009), while the nation’s educational leadership emphasizes math and science (Boyer, 2006). Beyond subject areas, students’ productive motivations are both self-focused (“I want to learn new things.”) and content-focused (“This information is useful and important”). Some rural teachers and administrators have lamented that their students are tied to the proximal, local and directly applicable. That can be viewed as a strategic opportunity for relevant application, and across rural areas, teachers and schools have leveraged students’ (and families’) value for local relevance and the applied utility of content and skills, to foster motivation for learning and subject area interest. This is the strategy of the geometry teacher who had students calculate the size of buildings for the community, and the history and literature teachers who had their students research authors who wrote about places where they lived. Teachers’ efforts to motivate can be enhanced by having multiple options and directions from which to reach students. Understanding that motivation is not a simple or unitary (all or nothing) phenomenon, but a complex and multidimensional characteristic, can open doors to many different opportunities to bridge motivational gaps for individuals and groups of students.

Motivating Special Populations:
Native Rural Students

Each unique group of people is characterized by particular values, concerns and other shared characteristics that constitute their cultural identity and can function as motivational assets or deficits (Tyler, Haines & Anderman, 2006). Some of those characteristics may interact with the characteristics of the rural context in ways that further complicate their motivation to learn and develop educationally (Hardré & Licuanan, 2010). An example of one such group often concentrated in rural areas is Native American students.

The dropout rate for Native students, in both urban and rural areas nationally, is extremely high (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007, 2008), making them a subgroup of particular concern regarding school-related motivation. Cultural differences influence motivation and school retention, as beliefs and values drive task priorities and investment of effort toward present and future goals (Tyler, Haines & Anderman, 2006).

Native American students in rural public schools are more positively motivated in some ways than their non-Native peers (Hardré & Licuanan, 2010). They value education both for individual achievement and for the collective good (Woodrum, 2009; Beaulieu, 2000), and experience positive motivating influences from both peers and adult role models (Faircloth, 2009; Gonzales, 2003). Native rural students have expressed a particular interest in math, perhaps due to its intellectual objectivity or lack of cultural bias, which positions them for math-related careers and college majors (Hardré & Licuanan, 2010).

Teachers and schools should work to promote high perceived competence related to content areas and skills, perceptions that come from repeated success experiences that students attribute to their own choices and efforts (not to luck, accident or teacher bias) (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Teachers should support positive perceptions for both individual students and the groups with which their students identify (rural students, Native students). The particular fit of, and affinity for, math can be leveraged for Native students.

A deeply-integrated Native cultural value is the collective good, which inspires and compels Native youth to achieve goals and embrace gains that give back to the Native community (McNemey et al., 1997). Conflicts between learning and achieving for individual or collective benefits create similar tensions for Native and rural youth (Hardré & Licuanan, 2010). Teachers can help reduce conflicts and enhance motivation for students with culturally
and community based desires to give back, by helping students identify how their learning and achievement serves their communities. An error that teachers often make is to emphasize the individual benefits of learning and achievement, rather than recognizing and leveraging students’ collectivist values for real and potential (current and future) contributions to community. Similar conflicts arise for others with collective cultural values, and countless different conflicts exist for East Asians, Latinos and other people groups with populations concentrated in rural areas (Brown & Swanson, 2003).

Knowing the motivational needs and opportunities that fit best for any particular group of students is critical to successfully motivating them. Rural areas are diverse, and whether a group is unique in ethnicity, culture, national origin or something else, being aware of who they are beneath the surface enables teachers to both respect and leverage their deeply held beliefs and values to benefit the students and their community through enhanced motivation to learn.

**Beyond the Classroom: School and Community**

Motivational effects on teachers and students pervade the whole school-as-system (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Each school constitutes a unique motivating environment, which is the result of interactions among individual and organizational characteristics, and includes knowledge, perceptions, values, communication, policy and pressures (Hardré, 2007). Teachers’ transfer and implementation of innovative strategies to foster motivation and achievement in is subject to support by administrators in their schools (Hardré, Nanny, Refai, Ling & Slater, 2010). The school climate supports or thwarts teachers in supporting students (Maehr & Midgley, 1996), so the climate that administrators create in the school is as critical to motivating success as what teachers do in their classrooms (Hardré, 2007).

Rural secondary teachers recognize that their contexts present both assets and challenges for motivating students academically. In reporting factors that tend to reduce students’ school-related motivation, rural teachers across schools cited rural-specific factors led by rural lack of jobs, rural poverty and isolation, rural lack of diverse experiences, lack of educated and successful role models, and lack of family support for education (Hardré, 2011). On the balance side of their motivating equation, teachers also saw the closeness of families and the interpersonal relatedness that they develop with students as assets supported by the small rural community context (Hardré, 2010).

Rural teachers and administrators agree that it can be more difficult to promote academic motivation for students in rural settings. However, it is rarely impossible. Those who have found success in motivating their students to find value, put forth effort and learn in school, regardless of their general ability and prior achievement operate on some generalizable principles consistent with motivation research that crosses theoretical boundaries:

1. **Know the signs of motivation and lack of it.** Be able to recognize when students are lacking motivation as a critical asset. Recognize that achievement does not equal motivation, nor is achievement the only or best indicator of student motivation.
2. **Understand why as well as if.** Remember that external behaviors are symptoms of deeper underlying causes. Students failing tests, not turning in homework or acting out in class are not the real problems, but symptoms of their needs. Addressing symptoms alone can actually make the underlying causes worse, while addressing real needs achieves much more than correcting current behavioral problems.
3. **Know a set of consistent strategies as a motivating toolkit.** and use them when a lack of motivation is apparent. Match strategies with the needs, to support motivation where the needs exist, rather than just a scattershot approach. Recognize that a given instance of lack of motivation may be effectively approached from a number of directions.
4. **Know your students, as individuals and groups.** Respect their individuality and cultures of origin, their values and compelling interests, so you can address what truly and deeply motivates them.
5. **Treat motivation and learning as long-term goals, deserving intrinsic solutions** rather than short-term or stopgap measures. Recognize that investing in supporting students’ self-determined motivation creates independent, lifelong learners, while controlling their immediate behavior will have to be done again tomorrow.

School administrators can help equip teachers with up-to-date knowledge and with diverse strategic toolkits by encouraging teachers to seek and share strategies from other rural teachers. This can be achieved at meetings within the school and district, at state and national meetings and conferences, from publications that feature rural teacher practice, from web-based resource sites, and in all kinds of social networks that include other rural teachers. Administrators can also support teachers in seeking long-term solutions instead of short-term fixes, as the school policy and climate created by administrators significantly influences where and how teachers invest their time and energy (Hardré, 2007, 2011).
Investing in motivating students can be the most valuable investment that a teacher or administrator can make, with long-term benefits for the student, the school and the community. While the existing lack of motivation may in part be attributable to characteristics of the rural context, that same context may afford the assets to address it. Even as test scores, standards and school report cards threaten to preoccupy and overwhelm us, we can’t afford to discount the importance of standing in the gap, supporting our students’ motivation to learn, to achieve and to become the very best they can be.

References


About the Author:

Patricia L. Hardré, Ph.D., is a professor in Instructional Psychology & Technology at the University of Oklahoma. Email: hardre@ou.edu
A Beginning Rural Principal’s Toolkit: A Guide for Success

Brian Ashton

Brigham Young University, Idaho

Heather E. Duncan

University of Wyoming

The purpose of this article is to explore both the challenges and skills needed to effectively assume a leadership position and thus to create an entry plan or ‘toolkit’ for a new rural school leader. The entry plan acts as a guide beginning principals may use to navigate the unavoidable confusion that comes with leadership. It also assists aspiring new leaders to think through, and vicariously experience, the challenges they may face in a leadership role. If focuses on three specific areas most relevant to rural principals: Dealing with professional isolation and loneliness, getting to know and thriving in a rural community, and basic management skills for the lone administrator. It provides a series of tools that beginning principals may find useful as they embark on a leadership journey in a rural setting and also identifies the specific skills various stakeholder groups perceive as most important for rural school leaders.

Key Words: Beginning principals; rural principals; entry plan.

Effective expeditions generally begin with a plan and a map acknowledging the potential challenges as well as the skills needed to progress through the journey. While few travelers plan to fail at the outset, history gives many examples of explorers derailed by their lack of planning or skills. In August of 1913, the Karluk, an American built ship, set sail under the direction of Captain Vilhjalmur Stafansson, for a sea/ice expedition to reach the North Pole. The ill-fated expedition was plagued from the outset with poor leadership, meager planning, and a serious lack of the needed skills that would have allowed the party to succeed. The Karluk was soon entrapped in ice and was pulled off course. The ship was eventually crushed by the sea ice leaving the men stranded on the pack ice. Of the 25 original voyagers only 14 survived the expedition (Perkins, 2000). While much less dramatic in nature, the journey from educator to educational leader requires the same understanding of the potential challenges as well as the skills needed to progress through the journey.

Much research has focused on entry plans for beginning principals, and a lesser amount on rural education, but there is a dearth of literature around the intersection of these two domains, that is, the specific needs of beginning principals in rural areas of the US. This lack of information is surprising, given the fact that US rural schools (29, 264) outnumber those located in cities (24,447), suburban areas (22,500) and towns (12,003) (Chen, 2011).

The challenges new rural administrators face often include lack of decision-making experience, feelings of professional loneliness and isolation, little administrative support, as well as standardized compliance with state and national requirements that do not account for school or staff size (Starr, 2008). Without a plan and an understanding of potential challenges, new rural administrators, like historical explorers can find themselves derailed and lost.

The purpose of this article is to explore both the challenges and skills needed to effectively assume a leadership position and thus to create an entry plan or ‘toolkit’ for a new rural school leader. The entry plan acts as a guide beginning principals can use to navigate the unavoidable confusion that comes with leadership. It also assists aspiring new leaders to think through, and vicariously experience, the challenges they may face in a leadership role (Jentz, 2009). It is also important to note that this entry plan is not meant to serve as a detailed itinerary of the leadership journey. Rather, it provides multiple sign posts or road markers against which new principals can check their progress to make sure growth is in the right direction.

Because the information regarding new rural school leaders is limited this article weaves the theme of rural schools and the new principalship together. It examines the challenges of being a new rural school leader and suggests a toolkit for new rural school leaders to help flesh out a research-based entry plan for a successful beginning as a rural principal. Its major focus is on reviewing various studies on school leadership practices to demonstrate the challenges new rural principals face. Research conducted on
administrators in the field can give great insight into effective learning in the school community (Silins, 2001) and also serves as a window into the work of effective school leaders (Martin & Robertson, 2003).

**Challenges for New Rural School Leaders**

Today nearly 31% of American Public Schools are considered rural, with almost a quarter of all American school children attending these schools (US Department of Education, 2011). Rural school boundaries are often very large, with small populations that are frequently in decline (Duncan & Stock, 2010). In these settings, principals play a significant role in shaping the school culture and organizing the day-to-day running of the school. In addition, they play a pivotal role in the community (Mohr as cited in Clarke & Wildy, 2004). State and national mandates also create additional stresses that are unique to rural school leaders. These mandates often increase the workload, create financial inequity, and expand the responsibility of already stretched school leaders without increasing the resources necessary for the mandates to be accomplished (Canales, Carmen, & John, 2008). Unlike large schools with sizeable administrative staffs and numerous resources, small school leaders often face these challenges alone, but are required to meet the same accountability standards as their larger counterparts.

Hood and Clarke (2002) describe six conditions often found within rural schools that can present challenges to new administrators: (a) geographic isolation that often focuses the school as the center of the community; (b) cultural isolation that prevents diffusion of effort”; (c) “financial stringency” caused by a small tax base; (d) inadequate mass where people are required to wear multiple hats that limit specialization; (e) personal loneliness where high personal visibility is complicated by the quick-moving social ‘grapevine’; (f) historical stability where schools represent the history of [the] community.

When a new leader assumes the principal role, the combination of being both inexperienced and in a rural setting can be overwhelming. In a study of ten new rural high school principals, Morford (2002) found that nine of the ten new principals left their position within three years. Eight of these responded that they had never fully been socialized into the organization as the educational leader. Morford posed an important question in her study, that if “the principal’s position in the rural high school is turning over every one to two years, who becomes responsible for instructional leadership in the school?”

The challenges most frequently experienced by new school leaders were outlined in a literature review conducted by the National College for School Leadership in 2003. In this study of leadership challenges in Great Britain, Europe, and the United States, Hobson et al. (2003) identified seven common challenges faced by new school leaders. These are:

- Feelings of professional isolation and loneliness
- Dealing with the legacy, practice, and style of the previous [school leader]
- Dealing with multiple tasks, managing time and priorities
- Managing the school budget
- Dealing with (e.g. supporting, warning, dismissing) ineffective staff
- Implementing new government initiatives, notably new curricula or school improvement projects
- Problems with school buildings and site management.

While Hobson et al.’s (2003) study focused on the challenges of both rural and urban school leaders, commonsense indicates that some of these issues are magnified in rural settings. For principals who are the lone school leader within their building, feelings of professional isolation and loneliness will be greater. Rural settings also increase the role multiplicity of the school leader as he/she tries to wear the many different hats normally worn by multiple administrators in larger urban schools. Rural principals often find themselves responsible for almost every aspect of “accountability, planning, monitoring, reporting, school performance” (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006, p. 78), as well as student discipline, working with the community, and being the public face of the organization. In a study of new rural principals in Australia (Thomas & Hornsey, 1991), many expressed they felt overloaded by excessive meetings, never ending paperwork, and the responsibility to interview new applicants, all of which was compounded by a lack of clerical assistance. Many principals in the same study also perceived their small community had unrealistic expectations for them and the school. As two new rural principals articulated (Starr & White, 2008):

"I’m running the whole day. . . . I find it very hard to close the door when someone wants to see me – because who else would they see? . . . It’s getting worse the longer I’m on the job."

"It’s very tiring. . . . You just never stop. . . . It’s just never-ending, I’m always busy. (p.4)"
When the stress and the unknown of being a new leader meet the realities of rural schools, the consequences can be thorny. This is clearly demonstrated by the extremely high turnover rate in Morford’s (2002) study of new rural high school principals. In an effort to ease the transition, this entry level plan focuses specifically on providing tools to ease three challenges faced by new school leaders that have the potential to be intensified in a rural school. These are:

- Dealing with professional isolation and loneliness
- Getting to know and thriving in a rural community
- Basic management skills for the lone administrator.

### Dealing with Professional Isolation and Loneliness

#### Tool #1 - Find a Mentor

Leadership can often be a lonely and isolated role that is compounded in rural settings. Often there is a “sink or swim” mentality to beginning principalship, which can leave new leaders overwhelmed, and school turnover rates high (Morford, 2002; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007). One tool that can ease this transition for new rural leaders is coaching and mentoring from experienced school leaders. The benefits of mentoring and coaching to the mentee include: guidance and support during the transition to leadership, increased self-confidence, encouragement to take risks and achieve goals, as well as having a sounding board for the new leader to discuss issues and questions (Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007).

A recent study of rural school principals in Wyoming supports the value of coaching and mentoring for new leaders (Duncan, & Stock, 2010). In a survey of school leaders regarding the value of coaching and mentoring, 97% of the respondents agreed that mentoring was important for beginning principals. The study also found that while principals value introductory mentoring, the majority (68%) of mentoring happens informally. Only 13% of Wyoming districts have a formal introductory mentoring program for new principals.

If formal mentoring approaches are the exception rather than the rule, then new leaders have a responsibility to seek out a mentor or coach. One of the most common places to look for a mentor is within the district. Duncan and Stock (2010) found that 68% of new principals found a mentor within their own district. This lack of outside mentorship can possibly be attributed to both the distance between rural school districts and the lack of a network of principal colleagues.

Duncan and Stock (2010) also found that among beginning rural principals, the four most helpful areas for mentoring and coaching support were in: making data-driven decisions, dealing with difficult parents and students, legal issues, and financial/budgetary issues. Other areas where mentoring helped, were: serving as the instructional leader, working with the community, and creating collegiality among the staff. Support can play a crucial role as the new rural leader navigates the potential hazards of running a school. On a personal level, mentors can play an important role by serving as a trusted colleague to help the new leader navigate the rural school setting where “principals and their families are an integral part of the community where every move is visible and every action noted (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Smith (2007) summarized how mentors can be invaluable assets as they serve new principals as an advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, tactician, and teacher. The new principal can gain important insight into his/her new role by working with a mentor who asks questions, challenges productivity, encourages risk-taking, helps identify goals, listens actively, offers encouragement, provides feedback, and shares critical knowledge (Smith, 2007, p.278).

#### Tool #2 - Develop Personal Resilience with Healthy Coping Mechanisms

Another area, administrators can develop to alleviate professional isolation and loneliness of leadership is personal resilience. Resilience is a person’s capacity to cope with stress and adversity, which allows them to bounce back or develop the strength to endure adversity (Masten, 2009). New rural principals encounter “dilemmas, tensions, and even contradictions in their everyday work . . . [that] entail considerable emotional labour” (Clarke & Wildy, 2008, p. 730). A study of newly appointed principals (Daresh & Male, 2000) found that beginning principals underestimate the high level of stress and the personal resilience that are needed to fulfill their role. Without personal resilience, new rural principals “face the challenge of their new appointment at a cost to their confidence, self-efficacy, and ability to manage multiple and competing pressures” (Clarke & Wildy, 2008, p. 731). As one new rural principal stated:

You can get buried. There are a lot of demands on the [principal] in a small community, and I knew I had to strike a balance. Friends who had been principals had warned me that it was one of the hardest roles you can do. The school is
expected to be the hub of the community, and often you have to do extra things like call bingo or sell raffle tickets, but that promotes the school and it’s good PR, so you have to do it. . . . You have to be very careful how much to take on outside the school. It could bury you if you let it. (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006, p.85)

Contextual examples of new rural principals in action can give us insight into the importance of personal resilience. In Daresh and Male’s (2000) study, new principals expressed the importance of finding strategies to deal with stress. Montgomery and Rupp (2005) found that the relationship between stress and coping mechanisms are extremely important in preventing burnout. Unhealthy coping mechanisms such as poor diet, negative attitudes, or drug abuse, can lead to poor personal and professional outcome (Farmer, 2010). In a recent study of educators, Whipple, Kinney, and Kattenbraeker (2008) found that educators who choose healthy coping mechanisms, such as exercise, have higher levels of self-efficacy. They also found this higher level of self-efficacy positively affected their actions, their stress levels, and self-esteem. By developing healthy coping mechanisms, new school leaders can better equip themselves with the tools necessary to deal with the challenge, isolation, stress, and the loneliness of leadership.

Tool #3 - Develop Personal Resilience with Purpose

Another method to deal with the stress and loneliness of being a new rural principal is through the creation of a personal mission statement. By linking positive thoughts and actions to their personal missions, administrators increase their chances of overcoming adversity (Farmer, 2010). As Kouzes & Posner (2007) state:

Values help us determine what to do and what not to do. They’re deep-seated, pervasive standards that influence every aspect of our lives: our moral judgments, our responses to others, our commitments to personal and organizational goals. Values set the parameters for the hundreds of decisions we make every day. (p. 212)

In their study of successful corporations, Collins and Porras (1994) found that “The very act of stating a core ideology… influences behavior toward consistency with that ideology” (p. 71). Therefore it becomes important that school leaders set aside time for self-reflection in which they explore their values and ensure there is congruity between their values and their practices as school leaders. A mission statement should be an expression of one’s core values and purpose. This purpose-driven mission can be a motivator for educational leaders (Rozycki, 2004). Leaders can use their mission statement as a rubric to judge how to prioritize and to best use their limited time.

Because rural school principals are often the lone administrator in their building, a personal mission statement that delineates their priorities and can serve as a guide as they sift through the many competing demands of the day. If left to chance, “Uncertain priorities lead to situations in which actions are not determined by values or principles” (Smith, 1994). Without priorities rural administrators have the potential to be everywhere – but nowhere.

Getting to Know the Context and Thriving in a Rural Community

All new principals go through a period of socialization, and it can sometimes be a rough transition. Clarke and Stevens (2009) described the experience of a new principal in a rural area that had undergone much transition in school leadership.

Before I arrived, there had been a succession of acting principals and people were pretty sick of it. My predecessor had done a lot of good work in the community, but was unable to keep the position. During the pupil free day before I started teaching here, a parent approached me and bluntly said, ‘We don’t want you; we liked the other bloke and tried very hard to keep him here. (p. 288)

In such a situation, getting to know the community and building trust is a key component to success. However, the process is a slow one and depends on the leader’s actions. Getting parents and community on board requires showing them that progress is possible and communicating clearly the steps that to be taken. As another new rural principal pointed out: “People in a small community tend to be a little more conservative . . . It takes time for people to work out who you are and what you stand for and to decide whether or not they can trust you” (Clarke & Stevens, 2009, p. 287). This process of socialization into the organization and community is a skill all new principals need to develop. Principals who do not actively choose to get to know the community and to fit their work within the rural context may find their efforts short-lived.

In cases of high leadership turnover, change becomes difficult to enact as the attitude among staff and community members may be that ‘this too will pass’. High visibility and effective communication are needed to begin building relationships with and among stakeholders.
Tool #4 - Establish Key Relationships

Socialization is the process of learning about the culture of a community and organization, “including cultural norms and conceptions of appropriate and expected behavior” (Duncan & Stock, 2010, p. 298). Beginning school principals have a responsibility to view their role within the context of the school community as a whole. Principals can jump-start the socialization process by establishing key relationships within the school community. Such a process as part of their entry plan allows new administrators to learn about the new school assignment, the organization, and about their role as leader (Jentz & Murphy, 2005). Establishing relationships can take the form of both formal and informal meetings that may occur either before or soon after the school year starts. This part of the entry plan can help the new rural leader gain knowledge, trust, and credibility within a tight-knit rural setting. This process requires new principals to work with other stakeholders in open communication regarding the health of the organization and to gain insights as to possible and appropriate changes that may be implemented (Jentz & Murphy, 2005). It can also demonstrate a willingness to establish both a top-down and bottom-up leadership approach with the school community (Jentz & Murphy, p.6).

Table 1 is a compilation of key stakeholders and the important information/conversations that need to be established as part of the principal’s entry plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stakeholders</th>
<th>Key Question-based Conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Exploring the District’s vision and initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying the Superintendent’s expectations for the new principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ascertaining the key responsibilities for the new principal as directed by the Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding out about special considerations for the school including prior performance, teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concerns, or prior pertinent history that will impact the new principal’s performance strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building a strong professional collegial relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTO Committee</td>
<td>Supporting and building relationships in the rural school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Showing mutual support and recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning about working history with previous administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site-based Leadership Team</td>
<td>Distributing leadership at the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding out the prior pertinent history that will impact the performance of the new principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessing the current mission, vision, and strategy of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluating as a group what changes will need to be considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning a strong professional collegial relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing the new leader’s vision of school leadership as well as the expectations and responsibilities for the leadership team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Teachers and Staff Members</td>
<td>Showing appreciation for their efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning a strong professional collegial relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to their feedback regarding what the school is doing well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to their feedback regarding what the school could improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to concerns the teacher may have regarding the leadership transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing the new leader’s vision of school leadership as well as the expectations and responsibilities for the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Expressing a desire to get to know their child and his/her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to their feedback regarding what the school is doing well and area for improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By taking the time to visit with a variety of individuals and stakeholder groups, the principal demonstrates: (a) an understanding that the stakeholders have a vested interest in the success of the school; (b) that their ideas and concerns are valid; (c) a willingness to listen and learn; (d) a respect for the culture and community of the school; (e) a desire to establish trust through understanding. Rural principals who build relationships with key stakeholders within the school community are more likely to avoid bad beginnings as they “hit the ground learning, rather than [simply] running” (Jentz & Murphy, 2005, p. 736). As Jentz and Murphy (2005) stated, by focusing on learning, “the new
administrator establishes authority not by prejudging what needs to be changed immediately, but by taking charge of the process – by demonstrating a clear understanding of how to start” (p. 736). Before embarking on changes or innovations, taking time to build rapport with individuals and groups who will be impacted is a necessity.

**Tool #5 – Take the Time to Build Rapport**

Schools tend to be at the heart of small rural communities (Clark et al., 2006). This places new principals in an important role: on one hand, they are looked to for direction and guidance, while, on the other hand they are also being scrutinized by the school community. Principals who take the time to build rapport with teachers and staff demonstrate their respect for the school culture, as well as a desire to be a part of the community. Rapport is defined as “a sense of mutuality and understanding; harmony, accord, confidence, and respect underlying a relationship between two persons” (Mosby’s Medical Dictionary, 2009). Randy Jensen, the 2005 National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Middle Level Principal of the Year, believes that effective leadership is grounded in healthy relationships (NASSP, 2011). As principal of a rural middle school in southeastern Idaho, he has seen the impact that healthy relationships can have in creating a culture of caring and in building rapport with students, staff, and the school community. Mr. Jensen’s 20 years of experience can provide new rural principals insight into effective tools that can be used to establish healthy relationships within the school community. The following strategies are excerpted from a podcast of an interview with Mr. Jensen regarding the establishment of a culture of caring within a rural middle school (NASSP, 2011).

### Table 2

**Strategies for New Principals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>What do to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowing Students’ Names</td>
<td>Mr. Jensen has the school photographer print each picture as a 3’ x 5’ with their name on the back. Each morning he goes through the pile. He makes a separate pile for students he doesn’t know and then focuses on these. “[This] makes a big difference when I’m walking down the hall, instead of just saying ‘Hi,’ and then faking it, I can say their name.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Advisory Teachers Effectively</td>
<td>Mr. Jensen plans time within his schedule to visit with each advisory teacher regarding their students. During the regular 10-15 minute interview, he asks the teachers to tell him about each of their advisory students. He expects his teachers to establish a healthy mentor relationship, so that each student within the school has someone that has a demonstrated interest in them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting Teachers and Students</td>
<td>Each week Mr. Jensen interviews four students and two teachers/staff members. The highlights of the interview, as well as pictures of each individual, are then posted on a prominent billboard as featured members of the school community. At the end of the week Mr. Jensen takes the four students out to Pizza at a local restaurant. When he is at lunch he takes time to ask them questions and makes an effort to get to know them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Rapport - Making Time</td>
<td>Mr. Jensen schedules time each week, either before or after school, or during their planning period to get out and visit with teachers individually. The purpose of this visit is not to focus on a school agenda. It is a time to focus on teachers and to build a relationship with them. Mr. Jensen states that “When you build that relationship with staff members, they will do what you ask them to do. You won’t have battles. You won’t have fights. And as teachers feel like they have a relationship with [the principal], they will want that same relationship with other teachers, and with the [students] that they have. It is about building relationships.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While these strategies are geared for a middle school setting, the principle of establishing relationships works across grade levels. New rural principals who take time to establish rapport within the school will not only increase their understanding of students and teachers, but they will also increase their chance of thriving within the tight-knit rural community. Most importantly, principals who strive to build rapport will enhance their opportunity to positively influence and shape the individuals with whom they come in contact.

**Basic Management Skills for the Lone Administrator**

The principal’s role, whether urban or rural, is a busy one. What makes the rural administrator’s job unique is the vital day-to-day role the principal plays in the school, as well as the intimate way he or she relates to the community (Mohr, 2000; Nolan, 1998). Southworth (2004) argues that based on findings from a study of small schools in England, rural principals are more involved in bringing about change and improvement, because they have a more direct influence on the quality of teaching within their building. These challenges are compounded by smaller administrative staffing and fewer available resources at the district office. This is a direct contrast to larger school administrators who have a greater capacity to “delegate responsibilities and share managerial tasks” (Starr & White, 2008, p. 3).

Rural principals often find themselves responsible for all aspects of the daily running of the school, including: budgetary issues, human resources, school discipline, conflict management between various stakeholders, as well as, serving as instructional leader, working with stakeholder groups (PTO), reporting to the superintendent . . . The list could go on. As one rural principal stated:

> The thing that makes me so weary each day is the array of things that I have to do. . . . At one moment, I am disciplining some kids, while two minutes later, I am dealing with a call from the central office asking me for some sort of report on my staffing patterns. At the same time, my secretary comes in and says that there is a parent who is demanding a class transfer from one teacher’s class to another. Next, I am being asked what to do about a roofing problem over one wing of the school. All this is happening before I have even looked at the stuff on my desk first thing in the morning. I love the job and the challenges, but I really didn’t expect that every day would be so filled with so many things I feel I still need to learn. (Daresh & Male, 2000, p. 94)

While there is no way to completely prepare for the flood of information and tasks that will be their responsibility, new rural principals can increase their likelihood of success by making the effective management of the organization a priority. Recent studies (Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009) point to positive gains in student test scores as well as teacher and parent assessments of school climate when principals focus on improving their organizational management skills. Simply put, by improving their ability to keep the school running smoothly, rural principals can increase students’ abilities to learn (Grissolm & Loeb, 2009). This is demonstrated in Grissom and Loeb’s study (2009), where they found that “principals devoting significant time to becoming instructional leaders in their schools are unlikely to see improvement unless they increase their capacity for organizational management” (p. 32). The importance of developing organizational management skills is compounded in rural communities, because of the lack of resources, staff, and time – due to the principal’s heavy day-to-day involvement in running the school. Because of the direct relationship between organizational management, student achievement and school climate, and compounded by rural principals’ lack of resources, assistance and time, it is imperative that new rural principals set aside time and attention to developing their organizational management skills.

The following tools are designed to help new rural principals effectively develop their organizational management responsibilities.

**Tool #6 – Infusing the Vision**

Before new rural leaders delve into the techniques and skills of an effective manager, it is important to consider, “What exactly is the leader supposed to manage?” Is it enough to simply manage schedules, students, supplies, and the efforts of others? Proponents of transformational leadership argue that effective leaders learn to broaden and develop the interests of their employees, generate awareness for the organization’s instructional mission and purpose, and empower employees to look beyond their own self-interest, for the good of the students and their fellow employees (Bass, 1990).

Transformational leaders focus more on empowerment than on control strategies (Conger, 1999). Leadership is the process of empowering the school community to grow its vision of what is possible to achieve in the classroom, and then guiding all stakeholders in that vision. Effective organizational managers learn to make the school’s vision central to their management efforts.
New principals are faced with challenges and opportunities in regards to school vision: (a) the school may already have a mission/vision that is outdated or less effective; (b) the school vision may exist on paper, but not in action; (c) efforts to change the school’s mission may be seen in a tight knit rural community as conflicting with ‘the way things are done around here.’ If the rural school already has an effective vision, the new principal can develop trust within the school community by supporting the vision and incorporating it into his/her efforts. By making the small school mission/vision central to their efforts, new school administrators are more likely to ground their actions in the purposes and culture set in the school’s mission.

When creating, or evaluating a school vision, new school leaders must be sensitive to the cultural values in rural communities that may seem unusual from an urban perspective (Clarke & Wildy, 2008). Support for a school vision can be built by making stakeholders aware of the outside forces influencing the school, and by enabling them to see the positive consequences that their vision-based decisions can have on the organization (Lortie, 1975). Once support has been created for the school vision, leaders can express this to the community by making it a part of the school’s regular communication. This process can be enabled in rural communities, where school news and happenings, are a major focus of small-town newspapers and radio station as well as the coffee shop. Rural leaders are encouraged to use the grapevine in a positive manner as yet another way to communicate what is happening. Another vital aspect of incorporating a vision is the need to make it the basis for decision making and action within the school. The school vision, in essence, becomes the compass that guides the principal’s management of the organization. It is for this reason that infusing the vision is included as a management tool.

**Tool #7 - Time & Task Management**

Despite the vast amount of research conducted regarding the importance of management skills for new school leaders, there is surprisingly little detail on what those skills look like in practice. Additionally, time and task management are not usually covered in graduate courses or principal certification programs. Fortunately, a large amount of research exists within the field of organizational management that can be implemented into school leadership. One time/task management tool that can work in conjunction with a school’s vision is Covey’s (1989) Time Quadrant. In this time/task management model, the leader’s tasks are divided into four different categories. The leader then places his/her tasks in the appropriate category (See table 2.) Covey argues that long-term effectiveness occurs in the Important/Not Urgent category, because this is the area that is most easily pushed aside by the urgent, but less important day-to-day tasks that can derail rural administrators from their goals and objectives. To facilitate this, principals can schedule blocks of time for important tasks to protect their priorities and most important responsibilities. This particular example of a task management model is offered solely to demonstrate the value of having a rubric by which new principals can judge and plan their daily activities.

Table 3
*Prioritizing Tasks - Examples*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important &amp; Urgent [Drop &amp; Go]</th>
<th>Not Urgent, but Important [Schedule it and then stick to it!]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled IEP meeting.</td>
<td>Informal observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board meeting</td>
<td>Positive phone calls home to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of a student family member or tragedy in the community that affects students</td>
<td>Walk-throughs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urgent, but Not Important [Schedule a time and get it done]</th>
<th>Not Urgent &amp; Not important [Get rid of it or delegate it]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some emails &amp; phone messages</td>
<td>Extended office chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paperwork</td>
<td>Constant checking of email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A flooding toilet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing files</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tool #8 - Effective Scheduling for Instructional Leadership

For years teachers and administrators have complained about parents who demand to have their children in certain classes. They are even given names like “helicopter parent,” and are joked about in the staff room. But is there any validity to why parents request certain teachers for their child? A recent study presents evidence that the actual classroom to which a child is assigned will have the single greatest impact on that child’s rate of growth as judged by student gain scores (Rowan, 2002). If it is true that the greatest single factor determining a child’s growth is the teacher, then rural school leaders have a mandate to ensure that each child is placed in a classroom with a teacher that will give him/her the greatest possible opportunity for growth. Because teacher effectiveness varies, it is vitally important that the principal leads the professional growth of the entire organization, so that individual teachers are better able to meet the students’ needs. This challenge is compounded in rural settings where parents have little choice who their child is assigned to simply because there are few options. Many rural schools are much like one Idaho elementary school in Teton Valley, where there is one class per grade and parents do not have a choice regarding classroom placement. This school structure has huge implications for new rural principals who must ensure that the instruction happening in each classroom is maximized to benefit each student.

As a new principal, this responsibility can be daunting. Because of this, first year principal’s efforts should focus on a straightforward plan that keeps the instructional leader’s role effective, consistent, but simple and straightforward. The purpose of this tool is not to outline every aspect of instructional leadership; instead, this tool focuses on instructional leadership from a management perspective. Because new rural principals’ daily schedules can at times be flooded with urgent, but less important activities, they must manage their calendar and schedule, so that their vitally important, but not always urgent instructional leadership responsibilities are not neglected. To prevent this, the following instructional leadership responsibilities can be prioritized within a principal’s schedule (see Table 3).

Table 4
Instructional Leadership Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walk-Throughs</td>
<td>Schedule short block(s) of time for daily or frequent walk-throughs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Observations</td>
<td>Like walk-throughs, these are flexible block of time, that can be a part of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the principal’s daily/weekly scheduling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Observations</td>
<td>These can be planned with the teacher at the beginning of the school year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This demonstrates to the teachers a willingness to remove surprise from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>evaluation, and to begin to establish the principal’s role as instructional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching &amp; Mentoring</td>
<td>Schedule time during the week to plan and prepare to: (1) evaluate the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>coaching and mentoring needs within the staff; (2) assess areas for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual development - this involves working with the teacher; (3) work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with the teacher on time-frame, method, and objectives; (4) Carry out the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coaching and mentoring role – this can involve working with other mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>teachers and coaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for Staff</td>
<td>Principals can schedule a small block of time each week that is dedicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>to planning and researching effective staff development. In addition, this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>can involve working with Professional Learning Communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While scheduling for effective instructional leadership does not guarantee student success, it does ensure that the new principal is functioning within his or her role, and that the appropriate processes are in place. To be effective leaders, principals will need to spend a considerable amount of their own professional development time researching out each element. New principals who focus on these elements as part of their entry plan are more likely to be effective leaders of instruction, because they put in place the processes and mark the steps necessary for effective instructional leadership in this role.

Working Towards Effective Rural School Leadership – The Continued Journey

Research has shown that before new principals can focus on being the instructional leader, they need to gain confidence, and a sense of competence, regarding their ability to perform their managerial responsibilities (Daresh, 2007). It takes time to
develop the necessary skills that are required to be an effective rural school leader. Effective leadership is a process that begins when a principal assumes his or her new role. The implication of this concept, for a new rural principal, is the importance to act and work in the present, while at the same time developing a vision and understanding of effective rural school leadership. To use the analogy from the beginning of this paper: An expedition leader has to focus on surviving the challenges in the here-and-now, while still keeping an eye on the horizon for the teams ultimate destination, and the success of the expedition.

Fortunately, there are some studies that can give us insight into effective rural school leadership. One such study comes from Texas, where school principals and other stakeholders were asked to rank the most important leadership behaviors required for leadership success in rural settings (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). This particular study can give an aspiring rural leader direction because it views effective school leadership from varying perspectives; the school board, the school leader, and the teachers. For the study, 206 teachers, 35 school board presidents, and 37 school leaders from small rural school districts were surveyed (p. 1). The results shown in Table 4, demonstrate that while there are certain behaviors that are important to each of the three groups, there are also important differences in priorities among the groups.

Table 5
The Top Leadership Behaviors Required for Leadership Success – Different Stakeholder Perspectives (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Boards</th>
<th>School Leaders</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Representation</td>
<td>2. Representation</td>
<td>2. Tolerance of Freedom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this study, the researchers used the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire Form XII that contains 100 items that are divided into 12 subscales which are: Representation, Demand Reconciliation, Tolerance of Uncertainty, Persuasiveness, Initiation of Structure, Tolerance of Freedom, Role Assumption, Consideration, Production Emphasis, Predictive Accuracy, Integration, and Superior Orientation (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). Researchers found that of the twelve leadership subscales, tolerance of freedom and representation, were rated by all three groups as most important for rural leadership success (p. 7). Tolerance of freedom in the study was defined as “the leaders allowing the followers scope for initiative, decision, and action” (p. 6). These data suggest allowing followers a large degree of freedom in their role, are aspects of leadership that all three groups value (p. 6). The second behavior, representation, was also ranked in the top three by all three groups. Representation was defined as, “the leader’s ability to speak and act as the representative of the group” (p. 6). Interestingly, teachers ranked the importance of this role higher than did school boards and school leaders. This finding indicates it is not only important to all stakeholders that the principal has the capacity to speak and act on behalf of the group, but that teachers in particular look to principals as their spokesperson. Also, this finding further magnifies the responsibility of principal’s representation role, because schools are seen as the heart of the rural community. School Leaders and school boards both rated consideration as a top leadership behavior, which is defined as the leader’s efforts to promote camaraderie and to develop relationships with subordinates that are based on trust, warmth, and respect (Gable & Kavich, 1981). While this criterion was not ranked in the teachers’ top three, nevertheless it was highly rated, suggesting that teachers perceive that promoting collaboration, being empathic, promoting team work, and maintaining cordial relations are important behaviors for leaders (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

The final leadership behavior rated highly by teachers was role assumption, defined as “leaders actively exercising the leadership role rather than surrendering leadership to others” (p. 6). This finding points again to teachers’ perceptions of the importance of school leaders assuming responsibility for their role, because teachers specifically look to the principal as the leader within the organization and within the community.

A second research study gives additional direction regarding the skills necessary for effective rural leadership (Winn et al., 2009). This two-part study explored Texas schools with recognized and exemplary student achievement ratings. It used principal self-assessment of areas of competence. The principal’s self-assessments utilized the following 18 skill domains outlined by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA) as important school leadership skills: Leadership, information collection, problem analysis, judgment, organizational oversight, implementation, delegation,
Table 5 shows the highest rated principal skills, in order, along with the NPBEA leadership skill description. These findings can give new rural principals insight into what effective administrators view as important leadership skills.

Table 6

Recognized and Exemplary Rural School Principals (Winn et al., 2009, pp. 37-38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal’s Self Rankings</th>
<th>Skill Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Providing purpose and direction, formulating goals with staff and setting priorities based on community and district priorities and student and staff needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Giving priority to significant issues then reaching logical conclusions and making quality decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>Perceiving and responding to the needs and concerns of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral and Nonverbal Expression</td>
<td>Making oral presentations that are clear and easy to understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Management</td>
<td>Ensuring appropriate instructional methods are used to create positive learning experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem analysis</td>
<td>Identifying problems, identifying possible causes, seeking additional needed information, framing possible solutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second part of this study (Winn et al., 2009) used state assessors from the Texas Department of Education to review and rate these same principals for areas of competency (see Table 6). The state reviewers’ assessments utilized the same National Policy NPBEA leadership skill domains to identify competencies that effective administrators demonstrate. In order to contrast the principal’s self-assessments with the state assessment, the second set of findings omit the descriptions of the skills that matched the principal’s self-assessment.

Table 7

Recognized and Exemplary Rural School Principals (Winn et al., 2009, pp. 37-38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Assessor’s Rankings</th>
<th>Skill Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Matched principal’s self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Guidance &amp; Development</td>
<td>Enlisting the support and cooperation of diverse professionals, citizens, community agencies, parents and students to promote the growth and development of all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Collection</td>
<td>Classifying and organization information for use in decision making and mentoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Oversight</td>
<td>Planning and scheduling own and other’s work so that resources are used appropriately and monitoring priorities so that goals and deadlines are met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>Matched principal’s self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Development</td>
<td>Supervising individuals and groups and providing feedback on performance and initiating self-development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Matched principal’s self-assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two sets of findings from this study, when compared, outline the importance of leadership, sensitivity, and judgment. When assessed by the state assessors, the importance of student guidance and development, information collection, organizational oversight, and staff development was also emphasized.

Common Themes

These two separate studies (Canales et al., 2008; Winn, et al., 2009) display common themes upon which new rural principals can focus as they work to become effective leaders.

1. Be the Leader – Teachers, district administration, parents, and the school community look to the principal to be the representative for the school and to lead the organization.
2. Give clear direction and freedom – Effective rural principals provide purpose and direction, formulate goals and priorities with staff, and then allow teachers freedom.
3. Leadership is about people – Leaders have a responsibility to develop relationships within the
school community that are based on trust, empathy, and respect.

4. Organization enables student success – Organizational Management is an important aspect of rural leadership and is closely linked to student achievement.

**Conclusion**

This entry plan has outlined a few of the challenges and provided a set of tools that beginning principals can use in their journey from educator to educational leader. It has also identified the skills that various educational stakeholders deem necessary for rural school leaders. While not conclusive, this entry plan adds to the literature by viewing new rural principalship through the double-lens of: (a) the obstacles new principals face, and (b) the inherent challenges of rural schools. Other items that may be included in a new rural principal’s entry plan include, dealing with problem teachers in a small community, distributive leadership in small schools and interpersonal relations/conflict management in a small community. These topics along with the general theme of new rural leadership, also serve as topics for further research and study.

**References**


**About the Authors:**

Brian Ashton is the Director of Badger Creek Outdoor Learning Center, BYU, Idaho. He is also a doctoral student in educational leadership at the University of Wyoming.

Heather E. Duncan is an associate professor in educational leadership at the University of Wyoming.
How Do We Get Them on the Farm?  
Efforts to Improve Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Arkansas

Robert Maranto  
University of Arkansas

James V. Shuls  
University of Arkansas

Rural schools, particularly high poverty rural schools, often have difficulty hiring and retaining qualified teachers. Here, we discuss three programs the Arkansas Department of Education has used to attract teachers to teacher Geographic Shortage Districts (GSDs) through material incentives. Unfortunately, none of the programs have had much success, perhaps in part since the funding offered was inadequate to attract new teachers to isolated communities. Additionally, we analyze the use of materialistic and non-materialistic incentives on the websites of all school districts designated as GSDs by the Arkansas Department of Education. Few GSDs display non-materialistic appeals that might entice individuals to seek out employment in the district, with the notable exception of KIPP Delta, the only charter school on the list, which has much more success recruiting teachers. We end with suggestions for policymakers and school district officials seeking to attract teachers to geographic shortage areas.

Key Words: Teacher shortages, teacher recruitment, teacher bonuses, rural schools, charter schools

As Ingersoll (2003) points out, there is no overall teacher shortage, but shortages do exist for some geographic and subject areas. Math, science, and special education are among the highest need subject areas. Rural and inner city urban districts typically suffer from geographic shortages (McClure & Reeves, 2004). A highly effective teacher can significantly improve student achievement (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Hanushek, Kain, O’Brien, & Rivkin, 2005; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). In some schools, however, principals worry about simply filling vacancies, not hiring the best teachers. The inability of some rural and urban schools to attract applicants leaves principals in the precarious position of having to hire whoever walks through the door, or failing to offer some courses.

As the baby boom generation prepares to retire, particular market shortages for educators may get worse. Fearing dramatic teacher shortages, both national and state policy-makers have developed programs to increase the number of teachers (Ingersoll, 2002). Further, the numbers of non-traditional paths to teaching, for example, Troops to Teachers, have grown, and indeed nearly a third of new teachers nationally come from outside traditional four-year education programs within colleges and universities (Maranto & McShane, 2012). Accordingly, states have provided easier pathways for those who seek to change career to receive alternative teacher certification. In addition, state governments often offer incentives to teach in shortage areas. Various states have offered loan forgiveness, bonuses, housing allotments and various other incentives for teaching in a high needs subject area, geographic area, or low-income school (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

In this article, we summarize the literature on teacher retention and provide analysis of state and local district efforts to recruit teachers to high needs areas. We provide a descriptive overview of three programs initiated with the intent to entice individuals to high needs areas with materialistic incentives. Next, we analyze the websites of the Arkansas Geographic Shortage Districts (GSD) to ascertain their use of materialistic and non-materialistic recruitment incentives in the recruitment of teachers. We conclude with suggestions for policymakers and school officials that might attract more and better teachers to these hard to staff areas.

Monetary Incentives for Teacher Retention

Although widespread, monetary incentives have not proved their ability to attract teachers. For instance, the Massachusetts Signing Bonus Program, which offered a signing bonus of $20,000 to attract teachers had little impact in attracting new teachers (Liu, Johnson, & Peske, 2004). Although it was marketed as an upfront bonus for becoming a teacher, in actuality the payout came in four installments. After the first year the qualifying teachers received $8,000; for the subsequent three years they received $4,000. Liu, Johnson, and Peske (2004) interviewed 13 participants who indicated the accelerated track to licensure was the biggest draw for them to enter the program. Although the disbursements were designed...
to keep teachers in the field for four years, only five of the 13 teachers interviewed continued teaching long enough to receive all of the bonus money. Although Liu et al.’s study used a very small sample, the fact that teachers were not attracted to remain in teaching for the pay is consistent with other research. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (1999) indicated individuals typically make the decision to teach based on something other than salary. Ballou and Podgursky (1997) suggest that simply raising teacher salaries does not attract teachers and keep them in the field.

As in Massachusetts, retaining teachers poses challenges throughout the United States. Ingersoll (2003) suggested the teacher shortage problem was not due to lack of production of qualified teachers, but rather reflected an inability to retain them. He reported 40 to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. In a Texas study, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) reported almost 30 percent of teachers change schools within their first three years. Not surprisingly, turnover of teachers is connected to the demographics of the students they teach, including achievement level. Teachers often leave low-paying, low-achieving schools in favor of employment in high-paying, high achieving schools. Critics of Teach for America (TFA) and other non-traditional pathways into the profession often lament that employment of graduates of such programs results in high attrition. However, systematic research finds that the low retention rate reflects the contexts of schools where they teach. TFA, in particular, sends new teachers to high poverty and typically low performing schools. Statistical analyses indicate that turnover of TFA corps members is high, but no higher than for traditionally trained teachers placed at the same schools (Grissom, 2008). High poverty schools often suffer low teacher morale and high teacher attrition no matter where their teachers come from (Payne, 2008). California had results similar to Massachusetts in its Governor’s Teaching Fellowship, a $20,000 bonus for beginning teachers in low-performing schools. The Governor’s Teaching Fellowship increased the probability of a novice teacher entering the workforce at a low-performing school by 28%. However, teachers who received the fellowship were no more likely to remain in the field for four years than were non-recipients (Steele, Murnane, & Willet, 2009).

While the $20,000 hiring incentives in Massachusetts and California did not yield favorable results in retaining teachers, North Carolina saw some positive impacts by offering a bonus of only $1,800 to teachers of math, science, and special education in high poverty or low performing school districts (Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006). Though the program was poorly implemented, it did appear to slightly lower teacher attrition. One reason for its small success may be that the North Carolina incentive plan focused on all teachers rather than only on new teachers, where most attrition occurs.

Existing Monetary Incentives in Arkansas

Arkansas is a relatively rural state which has had considerable difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers, particularly in high poverty rural areas. The Arkansas Department of Education currently tries to attract teachers to high need subject and geographic shortage areas through three programs: High Priority Bonus Incentives, Teacher Housing Development Foundation, and the State Teacher Education Program. These initiatives resulted from Lakeview v. Huckabee (2002) ruling. In fact, the Arkansas Teacher Housing Development Act specifically states the Arkansas Supreme Court ruling as the reason for developing the housing program (Ritter, 2009).

In 1992, the Lakeview School District sued the state of Arkansas claiming the education funding system was unconstitutional. Over the next decade, a series of legislative initiatives and court cases ensued. In 2002, the Arkansas Supreme Court affirmed that school funding system in Arkansas was indeed unconstitutional and required a legislative remedy. The legislature responded by developing a new funding formula and passing additional education-related legislation in a special legislative session. By 2007, after additional debate and litigation, the Court ruled that the provision of education in state was indeed adequate and thus finally in compliance with the state’s constitution. As part of the response to the lawsuit, lawmakers made these provisions to incentivize new teachers into areas of the state that have historically struggled to attract quality teachers (Ritter, 2009).

High Priority Bonus Incentives

The Arkansas Education Code lists a high priority district as a public school district with less than 1,000 students where 80% or more of the students are eligible for the National School Lunch Act’s free or reduced-price lunches (Arkansas Code § 6-17-811). Teachers who are new to the profession receive a one-time $5,000 bonus upon completion of their first year of teaching in a high priority district. Upon completion of both the second and third year in the district teachers receive $4,000. For the next two years of service with the district, teachers are eligible for a $3,000 bonus. Each amount increased by $1,000 in 2009. In 2007-08, 11 districts were
designated as high priority districts and 461 teachers received a bonus (Arkansas Department of Education [ADE], 2008). The total payout for the year was $1,415,952, a mean of $3,071 per teacher in the program.

**Teacher Housing Development Foundation**

In 2003, the Legislature passed the Arkansas Teacher Housing Development Act. Under this act, teachers in high priority districts are eligible for housing assistance (Arkansas Education Code § 6-26-101). This assistance can come in the form of a conventional mortgage (interest rate not to exceed 6%), assistance with a second mortgage of less than 20% of the home’s value (interest rate not to exceed 4%), and down payment assistance in the form of loan forgiveness of no more than 10% of the total cost of the home, or rent reduction. The purchase price of the home must be less than $100,000 and it must be located within 30 miles of the high priority district in which the teacher is employed. The reduced rent price must be at least 50% of fair market value.

To participate in the housing assistance program, teachers must be high-performing and must teach in a high priority district. A high priority district is one that has difficulty recruiting teachers and has less than 50% of students scoring proficient or advanced on any of the Arkansas benchmark exams. A high-performing teacher must have taught for three years at a district where 50% of students scored proficient or advanced on all benchmark exams. A teacher can qualify as high performing if he or she has taught at a high priority district and has three letters of recommendation.

**State Teacher Education Program**

In 2009, legislators consolidated the Minority Teachers Scholars Program, Minority Masters Fellows Program, and the State Teacher Assistance Resource Program to form the State Teacher Education Program (STEP) (Arkansas Code § 6-81-131). STEP is a loan forgiveness program, created to encourage teachers to teach in geographic and subject shortage areas. STEP awards teachers $3,000 per year for up to three years for teaching in a subject or geographic shortage area as defined by the Department of Higher Education and Department of Education. Teachers who are classified as in a minority qualify for an additional $1,000 for each of the three years. The 2010 subject shortage areas are listed in Table 1. In 2009-10, 188 schools in 54 districts were designated as geographic needs schools (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th><strong>STEP Shortage Areas</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Licensure Areas</strong></td>
<td><strong>Endorsements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics (Secondary, 7-12)</td>
<td>Library Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics/Science (4-8)</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts/Social Studies (4-8)</td>
<td>Gifted and Talented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf Education</td>
<td>Algebra 1 Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually Impaired</td>
<td>Middle School (5-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Language Pathologist/Speech Therapist</td>
<td>(Old Licenses: English (056), Math (111), Social Studies (159), Science (159))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Instructional Specialist or (Old Licenses: {K-12} Mildly Handicapped, Moderately/Profound Handicapped Severely Emotionally Disturbed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life/Earth Science (7-12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical/Earth Science (7-12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To date, the success these programs have had in attracting new teachers to hard-to-staff districts is not evident. It may be the case that the monetary incentives are simply not enough to attract teachers to these areas, especially when higher salaries can be earned in more desirable locations. Indeed, this may be a problem with merit pay schemes as well, which are often poorly understood and not trusted by teachers, ephemeral, and typically have insufficient rewards to change behavior (Payne, 2008; Ritter, Maranto, & Buck, 2009). According to data provided by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education, a total of $1,586,000 was awarded to teachers in either a subject or geographic shortage area, with a mean payout of $3,128.21.

We estimate that $616,257 was awarded to geographic shortage districts (GSD), while $932,207 went to teachers in non-geographic shortage districts (non-GSD). In addition 12 awards were coded as other, accounting for $37,539. Presumably, the teachers in non-GSDs taught shortage subjects. One hundred and ninety-seven STEP awards were given to teachers in the 53 GSDs, while 298 teachers received awards in the 192 other districts in the state. This means that, despite having a much smaller average student enrollment, GSDs were two to four times more likely to have teachers receive a STEP award than non-GSDs. Table 2 shows the number of STEP awards given to geographic shortage districts compared to non-geographic shortage districts in 2010.

Table 2
Comparison of Geographic Shortage Districts (GSDs) with Non-Geographic Shortage Districts (non-GSDs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GSDs (53)</th>
<th>Non-GSDs 192</th>
<th>Districts within 3 SD of Avg. GSD enrollment (173)</th>
<th>Districts over 3SD of Avg. GSD enrollment (19)</th>
<th>State Average (245)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009 Base Teacher Salary</td>
<td>$32,245</td>
<td>$33,984</td>
<td>$32,386</td>
<td>$35,839</td>
<td>$33,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 Avg. Teacher Salary</td>
<td>$43,842</td>
<td>$46,428</td>
<td>$43,020</td>
<td>$50,387</td>
<td>$46,056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent FRL</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Minority</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 Avg. Enrollment</td>
<td>1,253</td>
<td>2057</td>
<td>1,227</td>
<td>9,615</td>
<td>1,883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Total STEP Awards</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Avg. STEP Awards Per District</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Arkansas, a statute forces consolidation or closure of districts with enrollments below 350. This creates a positively skewed distribution of district enrollment. As can be seen in Table 2 (data from 2010), GSDs have much smaller average student enrollment than non-GSDs. To make a more accurate comparison of districts, we removed from Table 2, the outlier districts with extremely large student populations, that is, three standard deviations larger than the average GSD (19 in total). GSDs are 3.4 times more likely to have a STEP awarded to one of their teachers than similarly-sized non-GSD districts. Teachers in GSDs are much more likely to receive loan forgiveness from the state than are teachers from similarly sized non-GSDs. Notice, however, the 19 non-GSDs with enrollment numbers three standard deviations larger than the GSDs are more likely to have more awards at the district level. This can be explained by the number of teachers working in each group; the large districts have approximately 2.4 times as many teachers as the 53 GSDs. It is also likely the large districts possess administrative resources to help teachers with paperwork. By all accounts, it seems teachers in
GSDs are awarded loan forgiveness more frequently than teachers in other districts; however, $347,231 was awarded to teachers in large non-GSDs. In light of the fact that these teachers earn more money on average (approximately $6,500 more) than those employed in GSDs, such moneys may be more effective if allocated to areas of greater need.

Whether or not the STEP monies are awarded judiciously is beyond the scope of this article. A more important issue is the influence the awards have on recruiting and retaining teachers in high needs regions of the state. This deserves further exploration in additional research.

**Website Recruitment**

In addition to state-wide programs designed to attract individuals to GSDs, we expect these districts to also engage actively in recruiting teachers. While we understand that websites are not the only way to recruit teachers, they are the primary way an individual from outside the area may become familiar with a district prior to applying for a position. To ascertain the Arkansas districts’ relative use of materialistic and non-materialistic recruitment incentives, we explored the websites of all of 53 districts labeled as a GSD by the Arkansas Department of Education.

Arkansas is also home to two KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) non-profit charter schools. As part of the 99 campus KIPP national network, the two KIPP sites in Arkansas represent two of the three rural KIPP locations nationally. (KIPP typically locates in large cities.) KIPP Delta is listed as a geographic shortage district by the Arkansas Department of Education. Yet KIPP Delta campuses typically have an average of 14 applicants for each teaching position advertised, a number greater than for the geographic shortage district vacancies. We compared the contents of the 53 district GSD websites to KIPP Delta.

Using a prior study comparing public school websites nationally (Shuls & Maranto, forthcoming), we identified two monetary incentives, salary and benefits, along with six non-monetary incentives or school characteristics that might be used to encourage teachers to apply:

- opportunity to engage in public service
- freedom and autonomy in the classroom
- opportunities for advancement
- focus on professional growth
- collegial environment focused on teamwork
- results-driven organization

While not exhaustive, this is a representative list of the material and non-material incentives that may be used to attract teacher applicants. We used strict selection criteria to determine if a website would be coded as displaying each of the six types of incentives.

Upon visiting the website of each district we looked for the page that was used for teacher recruitment. Often this page was indicated by the words: Teach here, careers, or human resources. From the main teacher recruitment page, we looked for the criteria on teacher recruitment pages that could be easily reached within two mouse clicks. Some of the information we sought may have been displayed on other parts of the website that we did not explore; however, we were examining information that was easily accessible to prospective teachers from the main teacher recruitment webpage. Below is a detailed explanation of the selection criteria we used for each of the non-monetary and monetary incentives. Three coders used a binary coding system to code these incentives.

**Selection Criteria**

The eight website selection criteria used included public service, freedom, advancement, professional growth, teamwork, results-driven, salary and benefits.

**Public service.** A website was coded as appealing to public service motives if it seemed to appeal to a teacher's sense of duty. We included websites that mentioned closing the achievement gap, doing whatever it takes, and difficult or challenging workloads.

**Freedom.** A website was coded as appealing to a teacher’s sense of freedom if it offered teachers the ability to innovate in the classroom. When specific words were used for the type of applicants desired we coded this as appealing to a sense of freedom. These key words included: innovative, entrepreneurial, and creative.

**Advancement.** A website was coded as appealing to opportunities for advancement if it described possibilities of rising to leadership roles. Leadership roles were defined as anything from grade level chairs, master teachers, and future principals or school leaders.

**Professional growth.** A website was coded as appealing to professional growth motives if it mentioned opportunities to grow as a teacher. These opportunities to grow included professional development, mentoring, feedback from teachers or principals.
Teamwork. A website was coded as appealing to teamwork motives if it described the environment as a team environment. We accepted phrases such as ‘join our team’ as fulfilling the teamwork criteria. We also accepted collaboration and family as key words for this construct.

Results driven. A website was coded as appealing to results driven individuals if it described the environment as being focused on results or student achievement. We also accepted the following key words as signals: data-driven and results-driven.

Salary. A website was coded as displaying salary if it displayed a salary schedule or made reference to pay.

Benefits. Websites that listed specific benefits or alluded to benefits, including healthcare or retirement, were coded as expressing this incentive.

We used this scheme to compare all 53 Arkansas school districts that were listed as geographic shortage districts in 2010 by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE, 2010).

Results

As a whole, the GSD district websites displayed very little information relevant to recruiting new teachers. The percentage of the 53 traditional public school districts displaying the eight criteria is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Recruitment Incentives Displayed on GSD Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Percent of Websites Displaying Info.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovate</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results Driven</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancement</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There were actually 54 GSD districts on the list in 2010, but since then the Twin Rivers School District has been dissolved into two other districts and no longer exists.

The only district to consistently utilize its website for the recruitment of teachers was the KIPP Delta. The three coders agreed that KIPP Delta’s website was superior to other school websites in the sample. It was appealing and eye catching. It displayed pictures of students and provided useful information to prospective teachers. Additionally, it had information that appealed to both material and non-material interests. The following is an excerpt from the KIPP Delta careers page:

Whether you are interested in teaching in the classroom or supporting our schools through the central office, your work will directly impact the lives of hundreds of children in the Delta. KIPP Delta offers meaningful professional development and ample opportunities to develop your leadership skills. We encourage staff members to wear multiple hats so that you can develop relationships and grow in areas outside of your main job role. If you are looking for a place where you can grow as a professional and truly make a difference, KIPP Delta may be a perfect fit!

There was more information in this one paragraph about teaching at KIPP than in the combined total of all 53 GSD websites. If the GSDs are in need of teachers, it is hard to tell from the recruitment information on their websites. Of all 53 GSD districts, not one appealed to applicants’ desire for advancement, freedom, professional growth, or a focus on results, and only two mentioned team and one public service. Information about teaching jobs was often hard to find. In fact, we were unable to find any information at all regarding employment on ten district websites. Of the 43 districts that did have information about employment, most only had a job application page. In comparison, KIPP Delta appealed to every non-monetary construct except for freedom.

On the surface, the GSDs did seem more likely to appeal to monetary motives. Eleven districts’ salary schedules were easily accessible from their main employment webpage. This finding, however, does not tell the whole story. Arkansas requires all traditional public school districts to display their salary schedule somewhere on the webpage. Undoubtedly, the salary schedules were displayed in
various other places on each of these websites, just not on a job employment page. In short, the GSD websites simply did not provide much useful information to prospective teachers. GSD websites seem woefully inadequate at appealing to non-monetary or monetary incentives of prospective teachers. Such failure to systematically provide information specific to recruiting teachers typifies even large districts that have trouble attracting teachers (Hess, 2010).

While rural school districts in Arkansas typically report difficulties in recruiting teachers, the two rural Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) sites in the state report having roughly 14 applicants for each open position. This may be partly because they provide a plethora of information for prospective teachers on their websites. KIPP Delta is surrounded by GSD’s. Generally, whether in Mississippi, Arkansas, or Tennessee, the Mississippi Delta is one of the most economically disadvantaged locations in the United States and one of the hardest in which to place quality teachers. Yet KIPP manages to attract highly qualified applicants and has considerable success in retaining them. KIPP Delta has been hailed as one of the best schools in Arkansas (Maranto & Shuls, 2011). Our estimates suggest KIPP Delta is in the top 2% of Arkansas schools in regards to value-added student achievement. Of the 11 African-American students who passed the AP calculus exam in the entire state of Arkansas in 2010, three were KIPP Delta students.

Conclusion

In nearly every state, some schools are hard to staff because of geographic teacher shortages. To staff such schools, policy-makers often turn to monetary incentives because they are controllable, and indeed this explains part of the current push toward merit pay (Ritter et al., 2009). Unfortunately, particularly in the realm of education policy, the impacts of material incentives at the school and school district level are not always predictable (Hanushek & Lindseth, 2009).

Some believe the way to attract teachers to high needs areas is to pay teachers more money. Yet the costs might be substantial. In northwest Arkansas, which has grown rapidly in part because of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and because of Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, teachers can easily make $15,000 more than in a GSD. They can also live in a growing and more urbanized environment offering more cultural amenities and social opportunities, albeit with much more traffic and far higher housing costs. Generally, a $3,000 or $4,000 incentive seems woefully insufficient to attract the highest quality teachers to GSDs, given the alternatives. If the incentive was increased to $15,000 more teachers may apply, but what would happen to teachers already teaching in the GSD? Would the incentive also be available for them? If so, such state funded pay raises would not be politically sustainable. If not, these teachers might be incentivized to move to another GSD nearby to receive the incentive. Further, there is at least some reason to think that emphasizing monetary incentives could ultimately undermine the public service ethic of the teaching profession, leading to less focus on the long-term wellbeing of children (Maranto & Maranto, 2006). In short, schools are about more than just money, and the evidence presented suggests that the monetary incentives employed by the Arkansas Department of Education have been insufficient and insufficiently targeted to significantly assist GSD’s in teacher recruitment and retention.

Notably, rural school districts may face certain distinct challenges compared to charter schools. Freed from certain state regulations, charter schools may have more ability to adjust to local conditions (Wenger, Dinsmore, & Villagomez, 2012). KIPP, in particular, is a network with a national reputation. In contrast, few teachers have heard of the Piggott, Dumas, or Marked Tree Public school districts, to name but a few rural districts in Arkansas. A national “brand” gives KIPP Delta a recruiting edge. Moreover, traditional public schools are required to hire certified teachers, an expectation that may disproportionately hinder rural schools (Eppley, 2009). KIPP Delta can hire uncertified teachers, though they must be highly qualified. Previous research suggests that hiring uncertified teachers does not necessarily harm student achievement (Maranto & McShane, 2012). Yet KIPP has recruitment disadvantages as well. KIPP teachers are required to work longer hours and more days, with little more pay. Some argue KIPP Delta teachers are held to higher standards, making the job more demanding. Furthermore, KIPP Delta teachers have at-will contracts.

From the findings of this study, we make the following recommendations for recruiting in rural geographic shortage areas.

1. Have a Place for Teacher Recruitment on the District's Webpage

Improving the format and increasing recruitment information on GSD websites may enhance the recruitment of high quality teachers. Understandably, small districts may lack the talent to develop a sophisticated website. Often small rural schools have students create and maintain the website as part of a
technology class. Even though these schools may not have the ability to create an amazing website, they do have the ability to type some text on a page. This may be an area in which the SEA can offer important support. If schools do not have the ability to create a high quality webpage, the state could provide assistance. Arkansas provided over 1.5 million dollars in loan forgiveness for teachers in subject or geographic shortage areas in 2010. One option may be to divert $50,000 of these funds to provide technological support to all geographic shortage districts. After a one-time grant to upgrade the websites, funding could be reduced to that needed for periodic upgrades. Alternatively, the money could provide professional development for a number of years until the schools are able to take on web design responsibilities themselves. It may not be true to say of school web pages, "if you build it they will come," but certainly if a prospective teacher cannot find any information on your web page they probably will not apply.

2. Sell Your Schools to Potential Applicants

It is not enough to simply have an application or the salary schedule posted on a webpage. School districts should use their webpage to sell their school to potential applicants. This should be a place to highlight the unique things about a school. Time and time again on the various KIPP web pages information was presented to attract teachers. KIPP serves disadvantaged students, and uses public service appeals to attract teachers. Most GSDs in Arkansas also serve disadvantaged students and they could easily make such appeals. They could also highlight small town environments, low housing costs, outdoor recreation, scenery, or other potentially attractive aspects of the school or community.

References


Ingersoll, R. M. (2003). *Is there really a teacher shortage?* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of
Teaching and Policy: University of Washington.  
Retrieved from  

About the Authors:  
Robert Maranto (rmaranto@uark.edu) is the 21st Century Chair in Leadership in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. He recently co-authored (with Michael McShane) *President Obama and education reform: The personal and the political.*

James V. Shuls (james.shuls@showmeinstitute.org) is the education policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute in Missouri and a doctoral candidate in education policy at the University of Arkansas.