ABSTRACT
        To assist low-income rural schools with school
improvement and dropout prevention, the Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory (SEDL) has undertaken a multi-year project at
five demonstration sites. This paper shares observations and lessons
learned from the experiences of the five school districts involved in
SEDL's partnership strategy. The sites are small, isolated rural
schools with high percentages of at-risk students, located in
communities characterized by limited economic opportunities.
Partnerships were formed between the school districts and the
regional laboratory, state departments of education, other
educational agencies, and local businesses. These partnerships
targeted and addressed each school's needs. SEDL and state
departments of education provided extensive inservice training for
teachers, focused on improving instructional skills and strategies
through the transfer of new, research-based teaching methods to the
classroom. To develop instructional leadership, SEDL staff provided
administrators with current professional literature, modeled
leadership behaviors associated with short- and long-term planning,
and fostered administrator networking at leadership academies. Some
lessons learned at the demonstration sites were that change
strategies must emphasize the active involvement of teachers and
administrators in shared decisionmaking and regular site-specific
inservice training, and must recognize the critical leadership role
of principals. (SV)

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PARTNERSHIPS FOR PREVENTING RURAL SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Overview of Dropout Problem

Across the nation, educators are faced with dwindling funds and increasing problems. Societal problems such as drug abuse and teenage pregnancy, and school problems such as teacher burnout and curriculum demands plague our school systems. Perhaps the biggest challenge that must be addressed is the growing numbers of students who leave school before graduation.

Dropouts take their toll on our nation in various ways. Recent national interest in the quality of the American labor force as well as concern about dropouts and their impact on the available numbers of schooled workers have emerged from many sectors that are assessing our competitive economic edge or lack of it. In the business sector, there is concern with our nation's ability to compete favorably with foreign countries' products, markets and labor force both abroad and at home. Consequently, educators are being challenged to graduate individuals who are employable and productive especially in techno-logical areas.

Our nation pays a high price for the high dropout rates. In Texas alone, the estimated yearly loss in revenues and cost of increased use of social services for each class of dropouts is 17 billion dollars. (Texas Council on Vocational Education, 1988) A less productive la-bor force, a lower tax base, and a higher need for public services such as welfare, health and unemployment services are part of the dropout cost society pays. Furthermore, this picture is not a recent phenom-ena, as Catterall (1988) states: "available evidence, although sketchy, suggest that youth have dropped out at today's rates for the past two decades, and that this plateau was preceded by steady increases in school completion since the turn of the century." (p. 2)

Finally, there is a personal impact for those not finishing high school. Individually, dropouts have reduced earning power, are more

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likely to be unemployed, and have higher chances of being involved with crime than those who do graduate. (Barriers to Excellence, 1985; Catterall, 1988; Orr, 1987)

Rural Focus

This dropout crisis, not unique to urban areas, is also an area of concern for rural educators. Yet the problems of rural communities are not limited to providing a suitable education for their students and insuring they graduate, but in some cases extend to the very survival of their school systems and communities. The threat comes primarily from the economic decline of rural areas and the isolation experienced by these communities. Funding resources - federal, state and local - decrease every year and the diminishing funds impact not only the type of educational opportunities the schools can provide but rural life itself.

Economically, our national rural scene is depressed. Farms are being sold, translating into lost jobs, lost wages, lost homes, and dying communities. The process indirectly affects students who need part time jobs to help maintain the farm, and therefore cannot save for college. Students are helping by doing work normally done by hired help and reporting to schools exhausted and ill prepared; some students even leave school to take full time jobs. The money problems also touch family life; there is conflict when one of the parents is forced to obtain employment away from the farm in order to keep it. "Teachers and students alike cite the current economic problems facing farm families as creating additional problems." (Elliott, 1988 p. 2)

Decreasing funds mean cutbacks in educational programs. First cut are the non-academic courses such as vocational and agriculture classes. Often it is these teachers rural students turn to for help and assistance. Thus, the reduced access to rural vocational teachers compounds the isolation students face. Rural students are at additional educational risk because of limited scholastic opportunities provided and limited exposure to cultural diversity. They are separated from amenities such as museums, libraries, concerts, and plays as well as medical services and other social services. Elliott (1988), in her study of Iowa rural schools, quotes an English teacher's comments about the disadvantages of teaching research skills when students had to work with "a lean, outdated school library." (p. 2) In addition, there is a professional isolation such teachers experience. (Davis, 1987)

In addition to the conventional characteristics of at-risk students, (i.e. over-age, limited or no English proficiency, low academic

achievement, minority status, high absenteeism, low socioeconomic status, alcohol or substance abuse), rural students have to deal with the effects of isolation and economic decline. It is clear that rural students and rural America are at-risk.

The SEDL Strategy

In an effort to assist low income, resource-bound rural schools interested in increasing student achievement and in addressing dropout prevention, among other factors, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has undertaken a multi-year project in five demonstration sites. The purpose of this paper is to share observations and learnings gleaned from the experiences of the five school districts involved in SEDL's partnership strategy. This partnership has assisted rural small schools in on-going school improvement efforts where dropout prevention has been a major thrust in some schools.

The Southwest

The five states served by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory are Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. In these five southwestern states, there are great contrasts. There are extremely metropolitan as well as extremely rural areas, the richest and the poorest school systems in the nation, areas with high concentrations of ethnic groups, and wide varieties of economic conditions.

Demographics of This Region

Southwestern population growth rates are higher than the national average with the minority populations growing at a faster pace than the non-minority group. Of the five states, Arkansas has the highest percentage of rural population at 48%. Texas, the least rural with only 20%, has the largest metropolitan population. (Vaughan, et al. 1989) However, there is limited "rural renaissance" experienced in the southwest, as compared with other rural areas in the nation.

The people in these five southwestern states are diverse. Three states - Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas - have large Black populations. New Mexico and Texas have a high percentage of Hispanics. Texas ranks fifth in the nation in the Asian population count. Native Americans are prominent in New Mexico and Oklahoma. There are more minorities in the metropolitan areas than in the rural areas; however, rural areas with high concentrations of minorities can be found throughout the Southwest. (Vaughan, et al. 1989)

The southwestern states' population earns less than the national average, and these states have more people living below the poverty level. Rural economic decline reflects national trends, and rural areas dependent on manufacturing industries show the far-reaching effects of the national economic shift to service industries. Unemployment rates are highest in rural and minority groups, with rural minorities at even higher unemployment levels. (Vaughan, et al. 1989)

SEDL Sites in the Southwest

The southwestern sites served by the SEDL project are small, rural schools. They are isolated. These schools' communities are characterized by the limited economic opportunities tha: are presently affecting most rural areas in the nation. For instance, the "downtown" of one community now consists of only a gasoline service station and a "handy stop" all-purpose grocery store.

Four out of the five sites have high minority populations with a high percentage of at-risk students. These students can be identified as at-risk because of their limited English proficiency, low performance on achievement tests, or general below grade performance, among other factors.

Professional development for faculty and administrators in school improvement processes, effective schools research, and methods to increase student success have been used to support schools in working with at-risk students. As Felter suggested: "One can speculate that effective leadership, positive school climate, and reasonable expectations for all students could enhance the effects of specific dropout treatment programs." (Felter, 1989, p.115) Furthermore, Wilson found that "research suggests that many elements of successful programs for at-risk youth reflect the practices of effective schools, indicating that dropout intervention and/or prevention programs are likely to improve their chances of success when they operate within an effective schools environment." (Wilson, 1988, p. 6)

Through inter-agency efforts (such as regional laboratory, state departments), partnerships, collaboratives, and teamwork are exemplified in SEDL's project. Teamwork has been demonstrated by the SEDL staff, who relate to the schools as partners and aid the teachers and administrators in identifying school needs, especially those concerning at-risk rural students. Partnerships were formed also between the schools and the state departments of education in each of the five states of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's region. Other partners have included intermediate service agency staff and professional association members. In concert,

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these "partners/teams" have addressed the schools' needs and re-sources.

Strategies Employed

As indicated, the schools' partnerships targeted each school's needs. The strategies used to do this included efforts directed to teachers and to administrators. A discussion of these strategies follows.

Teacher Training

Rural inservice support is limited because of the schools' and communities' isolation. Therefore, various inservice strategies were used by SEDL to support these isolated teaching personnel. One is on-site inservice sessions to improve and strengthen instructional strategies in meeting the specific needs of school faculty and stu-dents. Throughout the projects' on-going efforts there has been a focus on including teachers in developing campus improvement plans. Inservice training topics were generated while working with the teachers and administrators on their campus action plans. Loucks-Horsley, et al. (1987) discuss the importance of teachers having input into the planning of workshops. At all sites, teachers were involved and at one site, teachers were interviewed individually as well as in groups to allow for their input.

Inservice sessions were designed by SEDL staff and some train-ing was developed in association with state departments of education. Some of the inservice sessions presented were "Writing and Compu-ters: What We Know/What We Can Do", "Effectively Educating Students with Learning Problems", "Teaching Thinking Skills", and "Instruc-tional Strategies for Teachers of LEP Students". These schools' ad-ministrators expressed support not only in providing resources and release time for the teachers, but also by superintendents and/or principals attending the workshops themselves.

Classroom demonstrations by SEDL staff and state department of education personnel followed some of the training sessions. These demonstrations allowed the teachers to see the methods in action with their students. In addition to training and classroom demon-strations, SEDL staff provided the teachers with feedback as they were applying instructional methods promoted during the workshops. This provided the opportunity for teachers to fine tune their instruc-tional skills in a safe, non-evaluative atmosphere.

One site, with a high limited English proficient student popula-tion, identified specific instructional strategies in the areas of

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reading, writing, and test taking skills as a priority for these students. During a follow up visit by SEDL staff, the principal shared that one afternoon while a second grade student waited for his ride home, she asked him what had been exciting at school during the week. Just as the mother arrived, the student said, "My teacher put up all these words around the room and I knew a lot of them." This had been an instructional strategy advocated during one of the workshops.

Sending the teaching staff selected professional literature has also been a component of the services provided by SEDL staff to the sites. Teachers frequently requested the latest information on different topics, for example, critical thinking skills or cooperative learning. Often the articles sent to a teacher were subsequently circulated to other faculty members.

At one site, this practice of sharing articles became a frequent occurrence during lunch. Some of the lunchtime brainstorming ideas found in articles were incorporated into school wide activities. This site now includes a "Whopper Contest" as part of its writing curriculum. Students write the best 'whopper", rich, descriptive exaggerations in stories, and the local hamburger restaurant participates in judging the entries as well as providing all participants with hamburger coupons and other prizes to the winners. This partnership developed as the result of one teacher sharing an article, the faculty becoming energized with the idea, and calling in a community business as a partner.

Administrator Training

With administrators, sharing professional literature in the areas of educational leadership has been continuous throughout the project and served two purposes: 1) keeping administrators current and 2) modeling the idea of disseminating new ideas. While visiting the sites, teachers often remarked to SEDL staff about the articles their principal had shared or principals commented on current information the superintendent had shared.

Modeling of other leadership behaviors has included generating long ard short-term instructional plans. Modeling the methods and patterns needed for short range planning was the first objective. Often SEDL staff worked with the administrator in developing the agenda and objectives for instructionally focused meetings with faculty. In some instances, scripts for the meetings were also developed in order to promote ease and comfort in the administrator's new role of instructional leader.

Once some of the immediate short-term needs of the school had been addressed, SEDL staff assisted in modeling the development of

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long term plans. Working in tandem, administrators, teachers and SEDL staff began with locating available data (test results, graduation figures). As the administrator guided the analysis of the data, the faculty focused on one or two problem areas and ploted a six or nine month action plan. This planning was particularly important in addressing the needs of at-risk students. Discussion of at-risk student issues, such as retention, focused the faculty on closely examining the impact of their plans on dropout prevention.

Administrators were supported by the SEDL staff who continued to assist in developing agendas, objectives, materials, and activities to keep the effort going, as well as guiding the administrator in identifying who on site would become responsible for these activities. Focus and attention on the long term objectives the sites had identified was maintained by the SEDL staff's follow-up calls to monitor progress. Subsequently, administrators began initiating calls to ask for guidance or feedback on new agendas or activities they had formulated or to discuss concerns with a trusted, long distance colleague.

Felter (1989) notes that school effectiveness correlates such as administrative leadership and student expectations "play a role in the implementation of reforms." (Felter, 1989, p. 114) SEDL conducted leadership academies that provided the administrators opportunities for reflection and interaction with peers as well as training in implementing the effective schools correlates, all to enhance their leadership skills. The content of the academies included areas such as differentiating between school management and instructional leadership, effective administrator practices and leadership behaviors, effective instructional practices for at-risk students, and conducting meetings focused on instructional issues.

Academies were held at a site away from the schools, so that there would be opportunities for networking. Administrators were able to meet and talk with other superintendents or principals who came from similar situations an important networking opportunity for administrators who often found themselves experiencing the professional isolation of being the only superintendent or principal in the community or county.

Lessons Learned

What lessons have we learned from three years of working as partners with these five sites? The lessons fall into three general areas: the strategies used to support change, the essential need for leadership, and the role of the external assister.

Strategies for Change

Instructional staff need continued professional growth, especially when addressing the needs of at-risk students. Inservice sessions support administrators' and teachers' active involvement in ongoing professional development and commitment to life long learning. For inservice to be effective it needs to become an expected, regularly scheduled process and for rural schools, site-based and site-specific inservice sessions reduce the impact of isolation. Using shared decision-making to identify local needs and local solutions demonstrates to rural educators that they have the power to make changes. Futhermore, personalized training sessions for the school promotes the transfer of new, research based instructional skills to the classroom. Teachers verify the applicability of the instructional methods promoted during training and this reinforces the benefits of professional growth. Governing boards' and administrators' endorsement of a policy for an inservice education plan provides staff members with the services and resources needed for staff development so that they increase their instructional skills effectively.

Not all problems could be addressed with inservice. The isolation of these sites hindered their ability to do their own search for resources or programs. Technical assistance by SEDL, such as searching for specific information about instructional programs or following up on leads about both human and material resources, proved to be powerful assistance. Being inside and outside of the five sites provided SEDL staff with a rich background for pointing out issues that had been overlooked or to offer suggestions on how that issue had been addressed in other schools.
Administrators as well as teachers appreciated directions to other available resources. Frequently the sites adapted or modified these ideas to meet their specific needs and resources. SEDL staff were sometimes their first link to these resources; however, the sites did not become dependent on SEDL, but became more adept at reaching out on their own.

Leadership

Modeling leadership and instructional behavior became an integral component of the SEDL staff's role. The process of modeling selected strategies was based on the staff's commitment to teach research based leadership behaviors.

Effective schools research emphasizes that instructional leadership is essential. This leadership role may be taken by various players in various ways. For instance, the superintendent's role as instructional leader can be one of providing moral support, locating resources to promote the schools improvement efforts, and providing a positive context for that effort. In one site, teachers ready to change their world, but without any decision-making or budgetary power or support from their superintendent,

could not carry out their plans. Other sites had superintendents that extended a helping hand or pointed to possible funding sources or just stayed out of the way.

The principals' role proved crucial and their contributions can not be overestimated. Some sites had principals that guided, prodded or focused the staff's attention on student needs. They listened to teachers' concerns regarding instruction, reminding the teachers of the needs of at-risk students or suggesting specific methods to the teachers. Often the principal was the main advocate of the at-risk students. Other principals became more effective under the guidance and nurturing of their superintendents.

<u>External Assister</u>

SEDL staff's roles as the external change agent were as diverse as the schools and their unique needs. The role of the external assister proved to be highly challenging and rewarding. The role as listener and confidant to the administrators and faculty helped to alleviate some of their isolation, as did SEDL's contribution of information, training, and facilitation. The need to identify an internal change assister became apparent and this need for an internal motivator was recognized by the sites. Thus transferring responsibilty to the internal change assister became part of SEDL's withdrawal from the sites. Clearly, the school staffs learned to trust the process they had developed and their determination to meet their goals.

Conclusion

A useful objective for preventing rural school dropouts is increasing successful student performance. To realize this objective, the school staff can engage in self-determined school improvement activities in order to change and improve their delivery of instruction for at-risk students. Schools that have strong instructional leadership, high student expectations, and a commitment to their instructional goals provide the conditions that will meet the needs of potential dropout students. This paper has reported about a partnership model that assisted and supported five sites' endeavors in reaching all students and developing their potential as productive and contributing members of their rural schools and communities.

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