

Barriers to School Success for Students with Disabilities in Rural Communities

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to review professional literature to identify barriers for school success for students with disabilities in rural communities and to provide ways to breakthrough these barriers. The author suggests a new, powerful and practical way to make rural education a leader in the nation: Get ahead, Get technology! Table 1 summarizes creative ways to turn barriers to opportunities.

BARRIERS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness of barriers to school success for students with special needs. This is particularly true in rural special education. Recent articles have provided information on school success including barriers such as lack of funding, lack of political, financial and social influence, lack of trained special education teachers, substandard school buildings, high teacher turnover and burnout rate. Concerns about rural education have led the field to focus attention on small school, small class size, and an overall depressing and hopeless view towards rural education issues.

Rural perspective on various topics was recorded in the proceedings of No Child Left Behind: The vital role of rural schools (2002). Topics include discipline problems and behavior management, team building, use of paraprofessionals, academic accommodations, college-school collaboration, peer tutoring, professional development, classroom techniques, parent participation, working with minority group families of children with disabilities, alternative teacher certification, distance education practices, web-based instruction, transition strategies, alternate assessment, and classroom research.

However, available studies provide little insight on rural potential. To date, the only study to include rural strengths (Parker, 2001) surveyed the unique characteristics of rural communities and its natural resources. No investigation, has examined ways to turn barriers into opportunities by looking at it from a different angle.

A NEW, POWERFUL AND PRACTICAL WAY TO TURN BARRIERS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

In this time of economic pressure, government cutbacks and global strife, we commend the deep resolve of our rural America to stay the course with their unique talents, creativity and abilities. What one sees as opportunities can be viewed by others as barriers to growth and development. It is usually a matter of perspective. The solution is not to avoid troubles but to change the way we see our troubles (Lucado, 2001). As an underrepresented member of a cultural, linguistically minority as well as a first generation immigrant to North America, I see an abundance of unexplored and unexploited growth opportunities exist in rural America. Here are a few examples of barriers that can become opportunities, with just a little attitude adjustment. Table 1 summarizes ideas for opportunities.

BARRIER #1: LACK OF TRAINED & QUALIFIED PERSONNELS

Low teacher salaries contributes to teacher shortages, teacher retention, and a high number of teachers who are teaching out of their fields in rural schools (Beeson & Strange, 2000). The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) estimated that over 200,000 special education teachers will be needed to fill

vacancies by the year 2005 (Kozleski, Mainzer, Deshler, Coleman, & Rodriguez-Walling, 2000). Shortages of special education teacher was reported at 98% of the nation's school districts (Fideler, Foster, & Schwartz, 2000) and is expected to grow (Whitworth, 2000). Shortages are especially severe in rural areas. There is a 100% turnover rate for special education personnel during a three year period (Hicks, 1994). There is also a shortage of minority teachers especially in rural places facing increasing racial/ethnic diversity in their student populations.

OPPORTUNITY #1: INVOLVE PARENTS & TRAIN LOCAL TEACHERS

Motsinger (1990) developed a model for parents' involvement in their children's education. Many parents have negative attitudes toward school. Many lack the skills to help their children. Motsinger also suggested to involve students' parents and their extended families as much as possible in the education process. Especially when human resources are in short supply, parents can serve as volunteers in class and tutors at home. They can support and guide other parents who just found out that their children have disabilities through the initial difficulties they face. Parents may be able to share child-care responsibilities to provide respite. The author asserted that each training needs related to the unique aspects of rural schools, inclusive collaborative settings, the use of technology as an instructional tool, should be used. For example, focus on home-based activities, and respect family cultures and values.

BARRIER #2: ISOLATED GEOGRAPHICALLY & SOCIALLY

Current special education practices that are based on communication among individuals working in comparatively close contact are less effective in rural setting. Technological tools such as videotapes, interactive and instructional television, computers, CB radio can improve instruction, enhance communication and sometimes avoid the necessity of having to remove students from their communities in order to provide the special education services they require.

OPPORTUNITY #2: EMPLOY TECHNOLOGY

Parker (2001) boldly pointed out that rural places include awe-inspiring works of nature to scenes of desolation, from beaches to mountain, rainforest to tundra. She observed that rural people, generally, have a more realistic appreciation of the cycles of life and death, cause and effect, weather, land use, environment, surroundings, basic interrelationships, and rhythms of place. Rural people use the surroundings as a laboratory for learning and applying their knowledge and skills. However, there are some disadvantages of remoteness. Fortunately, the remoteness are being lessened through the use of technology. Many studies examined the effectiveness of distance learning programs (Egan, 1988, & Valentine, 1990; Ludlow, Foshay, Brannan, Duff, & Dennison, 2002). Review of the literature revealed that students rated positively in organization of the course and helpfulness of the visual materials. Parallel research of the effectiveness of using technology model also point to the successful in having positive influence on most participants in the areas of school and community or church activities, leadership roles, task completion, self-esteem, respect for authority, attitude toward school, cooperation with group, responsibility, communication skills, peer relationships, school success, willingness to try, following directions, and self-control.

BARRIER #3: LACK OF FUNDING

Schools in rural areas and small towns face difficult challenges in serving the needs of children and public education (NEA, 2003). The National Education Association actively supports the development of programs that recognize and deal with the particular needs of students, educators, school employees and communities in the nation's vast rural areas. Sebastian (1997) examined preservice teachers' perceptions of distant education program through the use of interactive telecommunications technology. Results indicated adequate funding is needed to continue quality teacher training in rural areas especially in the area of educating students with more severe and complex needs. The lack of adequate funding in many rural areas creates problems ranging from inadequate buildings to limited or non-existent Internet access to outdated resources (Howley & Howley, 1987). Poverty prevalent in rural areas is associated with unequal representation in gifted programs. Barriers to equal access include cultural prejudice, family distrust of

school, the stigma of academic success, inappropriate identification practices, and poor funding for rural programs. In a related study, Marrs (1983) pointed out how funding inadequacies has led to shortages of special education teachers and uncertified personnel. Successful rural special educators integrate the following factors to serve the best interest of students with disabilities: Budgets, personnel, time, space, external funding, collaboration, community involvement, flexibility, recruitment/retention strategies, and technology.

OPPORTUNITY #3: SECURE EXTERNAL GRANTS

Rural schools do more with less. The E-Rate, which provides access to telecommunications and technology for schools and libraries at discounted rates, is of particular importance to rural schools dealing with geographic isolation. This philosophy is shared by the National Education Association (NEA). NEA continues to work with Congress and federal agencies to preserve and strengthen the E-Rate program. In the meantime, educators need to have access to external grants so they can share their projects and assessments with an annual statewide gathering of students, staff, and community members. In fact, Bill Gates is giving millions of dollars to schools in Minnesota, Iowa, Rhode Island and Massachusetts in order to use technology to create smaller school units (Parker, 2001).

BARRIER #4: SMALL SIZE

Many rural America's small schools continue to struggle against the forces of consolidation. In small, remote rural settings special education tends to focus on the child, the family, the community, and their interactions. They are less driven less by statues and more by caring and respect because not all services may be available exactly as prescribed.

OPPORTUNITY #4: 100% PARTICIPATION

The success of rural education is linked with what makes rural and small town America unique. The size of the communities contributes to the strong connection among rural schools, educators, parents and communities. Small size brings opportunities, higher graduation rates, decreased violence, a sense of belonging instead of alienation, higher achievement, greater community involvement. Small scale makes active participation possible. It provides supportive learning environment that give students a sense of connection. According to National Education Association (NEA), a growing number of large schools have been restructured into small schools. Schools in New York City are downsizing and decentralizing. Limitations of small size can be overcome by a variety of means including the use of technology (Mitchell, 2000).

BARRIER #5: INADEQUATE ACCESS TO SCIENTIFIC BASED RESEARCH

Studies that examined program effectiveness continue to show funding inadequacies and inservice inappropriation (Helge, 1980; Vassiliou & Johnson, 1995; Grisham-Brown & Collins, 2002). Preservice special education teachers were overall satisfied with the technology delivery model. However, technology training in teacher education programs do not provide future teachers with the kinds of experiences necessary to prepare them to use technology effectively in their classroom. For example, teachers in low-income schools often teach about the computer itself, and use computers for drill and practice, rather than for research, inquiry, and communication, as is often the practice in wealthier schools. Grisham-Brown et. al. (2002) further pointed out several other deficiencies prevalent teacher education program such as 33% of teacher education programs are limited by their information technology facilities.

OPPORTUNITY #5: TRAIN LOCAL RESEARCHERS & TEACHERS

Hutinger & Smith-Dickson (1985) proposed strategies to create and maintain rural networking system. Teacher preparation programs need to model the use of technology in teaching. We need to understand the science behind policy decisions effecting natural resources and the economy. There is

tremendous local capacity to do it. For example, empower students to become community activists; using funds contributed by local townspeople, students renovated an abandoned waste treatment center and created a marine science center; introduce local students to careers that will serve them well into the future; help students to transform the region's collapsing resource-based economy by harvesting its intellectual potential instead of its trees (Parker, 2001); train local people to collect data on natural resources, help them interpret the results and report it to the City. Whitaker & Votel (1995) recommended the use of mentoring in supporting school success. In their study, a program was developed by the rural school district as an effort to include students displaying troubling behaviors in regular classroom settings. Paraprofessionals and substitute teachers who had demonstrated empathy for students and consistent effective behavioral management strategies were selected as mentors. Mentors assist with individual behavioral management plans, support classroom activities, provide additional monitoring of non-academic activities, and help teach the social skills training program.

HOW TO MAKE RURAL EDUCATION A LEADER IN THE NATION?

GET AHEAD, GET TECHNOLOGY!

Tyler, Cantou-Clark, Easterling and Klepper (2003) note that rural schools, like any urban schools, in order to be successful, require adequate federal funding support, qualified teachers, technology infiltration, healthy environment, up-to-date resources, a positive perception toward people with a disability, and a steady economy. This is not to say that rural America is a poor country cousin to be pitied or rescued, waiting for hand-me-downs or scrapes from others (Parker, 2001). Rather, they contribute resources. They have the capacity and the will to solve problems themselves. Limitation of small size and remoteness are being lessened through the use of technology.

Since the early 1990s, the gap in the availability of computers and internet access between schools in affluent and poor areas has decreased dramatically (Lonergan, 2001). While most schools now have computer and internet access, many teachers still have difficulty with incorporating this new technology into instruction. This is particularly true in poorer urban school districts, where funding and time for teacher technology training are often lacking.

Technology is a tool. Students working together and helping each other more when they started using computers. They are more inclined to experiment with ideas and use their creativity. Computer-based instruction appears to unblock the disability like Learning Disabilities (LD). Children with disability sit still longer, produce more work, develop a positive self-image. However, technology has been misused as an electronic babysitter. Teachers suffer from the lack of access to technology. Teachers do welcome the training, but they also need the technology in their rooms. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds do suffer much more than just a lack of computers. Extremely poor schools are often the generous target of a university or business project, often receiving a lot of volunteer help along with machines. Schools in lower-middle class neighborhoods in deprived areas may be ignored for years. Even rich schools may be loaded with computers and use them badly. The key for rural school success is to get technology.

USE TECHNOLOGY TO REACH THE DIVERSE POPULATION OF STUDENTS

The racial ethnic diversity in rural schools will continue to increase in the future as more urban minorities decide to leave central cities to take jobs in rural areas and more migrants decide to "settle in". The cultural impact of this movement will continue to have a tremendous impact on minority families and on rural schools and communities unfamiliar with those from different racial and cultural backgrounds. One opportunity I see is to use technology to reach the diverse population of students. Rural residents have histories, customs, accents and concerns different from those of other places. There is and will be growing diversity with a mixture of ethnic groups, young and old, rich and poor, educated and less educated. Diversity may be the single most important asset on which rural communities can build as an important source of creativity, innovation, and synergistic productivity enhancing the quality of life in rural areas.

PROMOTE, EMPHASIZE, ADVERTISE UNIQUE RURAL STRENGTHS

Reexamination of the assets that exist but have gone undiscovered or unexplored, together with replacing barriers with technology solution, will turn barriers into opportunities. Take rural America to the media. Use journal of record, newspaper, cover stories, sell advertising, publish and distribute monthly publications providing a service and product that would not otherwise be available. Remember, the solution is not to avoid troubles but to change the way we see our troubles.

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TABLE 1. TURNING BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITIES

CURRENT ISSUES	BARRIERS	OPPORTUNITIES
Perceptions	Perceived as poor country cousin, waiting for hand-me-downs or scrapes from others	Rural has the capacity and manpower to solve problems.
Size	Small size	Bring opportunities
		Supportive learning environment
		Active participation
Ability	Out-dated resources	Realistic appreciation of the cycles of life and death, cause and effect, weather, land use, environment, surroundings, basic interrelationship and rhythms of place.
Learning lab	Run down building Ill-equipped classroom	Use the surroundings as a laboratory for learning and applying their knowledge and skills.
Evidence based research	Untapped natural resources research	Train local students to be researchers: data collection, analysis, interpretation and dissemination.
Transportation	Geographic and social isolation	Distance learning model
Economy	Unsteady Land use	Awe-inspiring works of nature Travel industry Welcome new immigrants Promote and support diversity
Funding	Lack of federal funding	Mini-grant writing External grant writing Federal grant
Retention and recruitment	High turnover rate Job burnout Low pay	Use strategies on recruiting and retaining diverse students and teachers: recruitment video, student financial aid manual, faculty visit to area high schools, etc.
Teacher Training	Limited availability of training and resources	Intra-agency partnership
	Uncertified special education teachers and para-professionals	Provide mentorship
	Teacher Shortage: special education and minority teachers	Offer incentives
	Trained in urban but lack the necessary skills to meet the unique challenges of rural education.	Grow your own crops: train local teachers
Social and political position	Lack of social and political power	Empower local students to be community activists
Visibility	Invisible No voices	Increase public awareness through media: TV Movies Publish Newspaper Journal Articles Stories Websites Conferences

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