

Rural Education Issues: Rural Administrators Speak Out

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the issues that most affect Minnesota's rural public school administrators as they attempt to fulfill the mandates required from state legislation and communities. A second purpose was to identify exemplary practices valued by individual Minnesota rural schools and districts. Electronic surveys were sent to all of the superintendents, principals, and business managers in the 141 school districts that belong to the Minnesota Rural Education Association for a total of 465 surveys. These members were asked to provide demographic information, priorities, needs, best practices, and policy suggestions in order to establish lines of inquiry for further investigation. Researchers then conducted focus groups of school administrators in each of six regions of Minnesota following the results of the survey. Results identified three priority categories of concern, attainment of student performance and learning goals, fiscal management and curriculum and instruction, with ten related needs for assistance, in addition to policy and process changes identified to address those concerns. After analysis of this study's survey responses and focus group participation, the needs and priorities collected from leaders of rural school districts indicate opportunities to review and revise current funding policies, as well as considerations to modify or review procedures employed by state agencies, professional education organizations, colleges and universities. While it is true that additional financial resources would always be welcomed, participants in this study identified means by which rural education could be improved through revised allocation of resources. By systematically soliciting the insights of the individuals who can balance the requirements of the federal and state mandates with the realities of the communities they serve, may be able to

strengthen the connections between rural schools, and those who make decisions. (Contains 1 table)

Introduction

Administrators in rural school districts are continuously faced with the challenges of trying to meet their educational goals with limited resources. Current conditions that disproportionately affect rural schools in Minnesota include population decline, allocation distribution according to the state's funding formula, and mandated reform initiatives. Often, this solution proposed to address economic issues in rural districts, has included mandates to consolidate, collaborate and cooperate. Rural districts have attempted to address economic realities in many combinations of collaborative efforts with varying levels of success. This study was an attempt to give voice to the needs of Minnesota's rural districts; needs distinct from those of urban districts.

Purpose of the Study

Rural schools in Minnesota have unique needs that impact the education of 30% of students in the state (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Declining enrollments as well as the means by which state funds and services are disbursed have created crises due to loss of per-pupil state revenue used to finance most school programs. Rural schools have also experienced recent challenges due to increased health care, transportation, special education services, and other expenses (Thorson & Maxwell, 2002).

In legislative session after legislative session, lawmakers and policy writers have advocated collaboration and consolidation as means to address the finances of rural schools. However, little documentation exists regarding effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative, or shared services implemented in rural schools. Due to the uniqueness of each rural district,

including factors of geographic separation, access to the Minnesota Department of Education, technological resources, training of leadership in collaborative efforts, grant writing, and processes for group decision-making, these collaborations vary greatly. In order to provide assistance for struggling rural administrators, a study, supported by a grant from the Center for Rural Policy and Development to identify those issues that most affect the state's rural administrators, was conducted by University of Minnesota Duluth researchers (Williams, J., Nierengarten, G., Riordan, K., Munson, B., & Corbett, D. 2009). The study had three goals: to gather the perspectives of rural administrators regarding their priorities and needs, to identify exemplary practices in collaborative initiatives as reported by administrators, and to recommend policy changes to improve educational effectiveness utilizing collaborative practices in rural school districts during these times of economic cutbacks.

Framework

Researcher Richard Elmore (1999) defined the position of the school administrator as a “coupling,” as in the coupling that attaches a garden hose to a spigot. His metaphor for the traditional relationship between the work of schools and the communities they serve has been that of “Loose Couplings.” As Elmore explains, often the role of the administrator has been to protect the work of teachers, and to project the image to the public that the principal was managing well, creating “logic of confidence between public schools and their constituents” (p.8).

It is a traditional expectation for principals and superintendents to maintain communication of the needs to internal and external constituents of a community's schools (Bagin, et. al., 2007). Positioned at the place where the demographic, geographic, and financial

realities of any rural community intersect with the needs of its school children and the politics and pressures of mandates and legislation, are the schools' administrators.

Administrators in rural school districts over the past two decades have been continuously faced with the inequities and challenges of trying to meet both educational goals and new educational mandates with consistently dwindling resources. Since at least 1994, administrators have been juggling a stream of concurrent and consecutive state and national reform initiatives (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). Yet, districts in rural Minnesota and across the nation remain centers of community, and continue to survive. Rural school administrators who have remained have learned to function within their district's shrinking opportunities and constraints. One means by which not only survival, but flourishing progress in some areas of service has been maintained is via collaborative and cooperative processes generated through grant initiatives, and identification of needs and shared services within and across communities. The stories and experiences of rural administrators, who initiated, shepherded, led, or benefitted from such initiatives on regional or close-proximity basis, when gathered and analyzed, could provide insight into innovative and exemplary practices that work in rural schools. Their insights could help to find ways to address the effects of policy and procedures that unfairly affect the schools in rural areas.

Modes of Inquiry

An electronic survey was developed to acquire and share the issues and learned insights important to rural schools in Minnesota. Survey choices were developed from current literature regarding rural issues, state legislation regarding shared and collaborative services, and current shared services models. Using the membership listing of the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA), superintendents, business managers, and principals in member schools

were asked to provide demographic information, priorities, needs, best practices, and policy suggestions in order to establish lines of inquiry for further investigation.

Anticipating that the response rate would be low, and as a means of triangulating the results, researchers conducted focus groups of school administrators in each of six regions of Minnesota following the results of the survey. Survey results were used to formulate protocol and in-depth questions for the focus groups. The focus groups offered detailed data about community and regional collaborative efforts to provide quality education in out-state districts. Focus groups also generated suggestions for policy and procedural changes that could benefit rural schools, not only in Minnesota, but across the nation.

Data Sources

Electronic surveys were sent to all of the superintendents, principals, and business managers in the 141 school districts that belong to the Minnesota Rural Education Association for a total of 465 surveys. This convenience sample represented self-selected rural school districts in Minnesota. Survey respondents represented school districts that varied in size. They included one large district of over 8,000, but most were very small, with more than two-thirds of the participating school districts serving less than 1,000 students. Of the 465 surveys sent, 300 were received by intended addressees. Ninety-one of those surveys received at intended addresses were completed. Nine returned surveys were not used by the researchers due to ineligible respondent category. The remaining eighty-two of the returned surveys (including 22 superintendents, 43 principals, 10 district business administrators, and 7 who indicated they filled mixed roles in districts) with representation from all of the six regions of the state, were analyzed in order to prepare follow-up questions for the focus groups that were scheduled after the survey results were completed. Survey respondents were asked to rank a list of concerns that

commonly involve school district administrators. Among the 13 concerns presented in the survey, “Attainment of student performance and learning goals” was ranked as 1 or 2 by respondents representing all of the surveyed administrative roles. In contrast, “Fiscal Management” was ranked second, but largely by superintendents rather than principals. Curriculum and Instruction ranked third.

As the survey respondents considered their top two priorities, they offered narratives about their needs for assistance or services to address those priority concerns. The survey narratives were coded according to validated themes identified from current literature. The dominant need for assistance identified by the surveyed administrators was related to testing and AYP (annual yearly progress). Balancing budgets and inflation was the second most commonly identified need/issue. The third most commonly identified need on the survey was achievement for all. Table 1 delineates the 12 themes most prevalent among the needs identified.

Table 1

Themes of Needs affecting School Administrator’s Priorities

Themes of Needs	# Administrators expressing this need	Priority Area
Testing and AYP	53	Student Performance and Learning Goals
Balancing budgets	43	Fiscal Management
Student achievement	32	Student Performance and Learning goals
Transportation/sparsity	26	Fiscal Management
Staff/Professional Development	24	Student Performance and Learning Goals
Data Analysis	24	Student Performance and Learning Goals
Curriculum Alignment with Standards	18	Curriculum and Instruction
Offering a rigorous curriculum	13	Curriculum and Instruction

Salary & Retention of HQ teachers	12	Fiscal Management
Special Education Needs	15	Student Performance and Learning Goals

Three focus groups of superintendents and three focus groups of principals were held across the state in the Northwest, North Central, Northeast, Southwest, South Central and Southeast regions. Protocol for the focus groups was developed after the survey returns were analyzed, with the intent of soliciting response to the survey’s identified priorities, and to gain additional information regarding successful practices and recommendations. Participants were invited based on geography and membership in the Rural Education Association. Each of the groups included 5-8 participants. The focus groups were asked to respond and expanded on the results gathered from the survey as well the priorities identified in the literature.

The second goal of this study was to identify exemplary practices currently valued by individual Minnesota rural schools and districts. A wide range of practices was identified as relevant and useful in the survey responses, as well as through the focus groups’ responses. Response to Intervention (RTI) and individualized programs for special needs students were the most frequently identified. The second category of exemplary practices identified efforts related to facilitating professional relationships and collaborations. Professional learning communities, collaborative planning, collaborative data analysis, and dedicated efforts to build relationships within the district all were cited as exemplary efforts.

Collaborations included a wide range of goals and efforts. While just over half (51%) of the survey respondents indicated that they collaborate with an outside agency, service, or organization to assist in achieving their goals, all of the focus group participants shared more than one successful current collaboration. Staff development was the most frequent goal for initiating collaborative efforts. Another goal frequently cited in initiating of collaborative

practices was to provide special education services. Collaboration with county agencies to provide valued mental health services appeared strongly in each of the regional focus groups. Collaboration for online courses was also frequently reported as a collaborative effort. Collaborators across districts included local organizations or programs, neighboring districts, educational agencies, and universities. Respondents and focus group members demonstrated a significant commitment to developing collaborations to extend the potential of their educational efforts. However, respondents and participants alike noted that there can be challenges or disadvantages to collaborative efforts:

Our region is so sparsely populated that in order to get a grant, several school districts or counties must participate. By the time we take care of the paperwork, travel, meetings long distances away, shared resources and other bureaucracy, there is very little that trickles down to our students. (Principal)

Conclusions

After analysis of this study's survey responses and focus group participation, the needs and priorities collected from leaders of rural school districts indicate opportunities to review and revise current funding policies, as well as considerations to modify or review procedures employed by state agencies, professional education organizations, colleges and universities. Both the administrators surveyed and the participants of the regional focus groups identified their priorities to be: student achievement, fiscal management, and curriculum and instruction. From within these priorities, the participants identified needs for specific assistance, starting with testing and adequate yearly progress, balancing budgets, student achievement, transportation/sparsity, professional development, and data analysis.

Policy recommendations followed, with the participants identifying opportunities for policy revision that included changes to the state funding formula. Other recommendations fell into procedure categories, such as Department of Education practices regarding state testing and service provision. Although these responses may well have fallen into the realm of the expected, the various means by which the needs were addressed, the varied configurations of collaborative groups, the variety of generated funding streams, and the variations of success and sustainability of the responses to needs identified through the surveys and focus groups illustrates the pervasive nature of the lack of response by legislation, government and other agencies in establishing best practices and resource repositories for struggling rural entities. Each administrator, in each region continues to need to generate response to need without a clearinghouse of possible collaborations or a store of sustainable solutions.

The voices of the participants of this study identified a need to re-visit the current state funding formula in several areas in areas that could, indeed, affect collaborative possibilities for schools. General dissatisfaction with the allocations was prevalent, with a majority of the participants identifying a disconnection between the reality of a small, rural school district and lawmakers. The problems of distance and economy were expressed in each region, as administrators related the difficulties of busing, fuel prices, and the expenses of travel and supervision that compound disparate funding. Professional development of staff to affect student achievement was cited predominately in each region as difficult to provide due to distance, but also due to lack of sufficient incentive to dedicate the current required set-aside without exercising waiver options. Efforts to provide collaborative and cooperative staff development are affected due to distances, and therefore cost of transportation, between staff development providers and staff who are in need of training.

In addition, all regions referred to the difficulties of rural schools relative to an unpredictable accurate budgeting process. Capacity to attract and retain quality staff, to maintain buildings, and to purchase cooperatively are directly affected by the possibility each year of funding falling short of spring projections. Policy recommendations included increased support for professional development in rural districts via mandated, inflexible budget categories, and a commitment to rural districts to fund at annual projected levels at minimum.

Participants in each region also offered possibilities for change in practices by professional education organizations and unions, and colleges and universities that could positively affect rural districts. The most prevalent requests for assistance were in regard to the state tests and procedures. Most often recommended was change in the examinations to reflect growth within, rather than across cohorts, and for results to be provided to districts to use formatively for those students taking the tests. Distance to attend state-level staff development and cost to the districts in out-state Minnesota to bring MDE staff and other professional development providers to the locations impedes rural educators' equal access to information and opportunities. Recommendations included provision of more regional and on-line opportunities for trainings.

Regional focus groups revealed increasing frustration with the pattern of gains in programs and services due to grants and the subsequent loss of promising practices and programs as grant funding ends. Participants, who have increasingly sought grant funding in order to offset increased costs, expressed disappointment in the loss of time and revenue used to establish collaborative grant work and the lack of continuous funding for programs that have provided effective interventions. Participants also reported difficulty in administrative decision-making with reduced funds regarding course offerings for college-bound, at-risk, and isolated interests of

rural students, yet training in establishment and sustaining collaborative efforts was not part of training for administrators. A need was expressed for professional development for administrators in the establishment and utilization of collaborations and cooperative initiatives. Overall, the range of successful collaborations across the state was impressive, from police services to shared administration, yet few were aware of the collaborations of others. Clearing-houses for sharing best practices across districts could prove helpful for bringing best practices to scale.

Significance of the Study

While it is true that additional financial resources would always be welcomed, participants in this study identified means by which rural education could be improved through revised allocation of resources. In fact, changes in policy and procedures, if implemented in time, could make great differences to rural students. By systematically soliciting the insights of the individuals who can balance the requirements of the federal and state mandates with the realities of the communities they serve, may be able to strengthen the connections between rural schools, and those who make decisions. Implications for future study could include comparisons of priorities of rural educators across states in order to create repositories for effective practices, and to develop professional learning communities that connect rural educators with state and federal legislators through strategic data collection, analysis and communication.

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