

## **Growing Your Own Educational Leaders: Implications for Rural School Districts and Institutions of Higher Education**

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*The purpose of this article is to examine a ‘grow your own’ model of leadership preparation and placement of educational administrators in the state of Tennessee. The growing need for school and district administrators in the rural counties of Tennessee mirrors a nationwide issue, and state policymakers and practitioners must respond appropriately to sustain adequate K-12 educational leadership that is representative of state demographics. Recommendations for policy and practice are provided for state and local education agencies as well as principal preparation programs in higher education.*

The ‘grow your own’ model of leadership offers alternatives to rural school districts facing shortages in administrative candidates, low retention rates for principals, and high retirement rates. Rural districts in particular face challenges of being under-resourced as well as overwhelmed by the need for recruitment and retention of qualified administrators. Leadership roles in rural school districts may be affected by rural contexts. The impact of leadership shortages and administrative turnover constitute the need for ‘grow your own’ leadership programs in rural areas. This article examines one ‘grow your own’ program in Tennessee that may increase the number of entry-level administrators and reinforce the principal pipeline in its rural school districts (see Figure 1).

The necessity to develop leaders from within the walls of rural schools is the guiding force behind leadership sustainability in the rural context. Consistency in school and district leadership is paramount in improving student achievement for rural students, where abrupt “change in leadership can have dramatic, negative effects on academic performance,” especially for students from impoverished households (Blanchard et al., 2019). In Tennessee, approximately 17% of principals (~278/year) left their positions from 2012 to 2015, with nearly a third leaving within their first three years (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Forty percent exit the education system altogether, 19% transfer to a within-district school, 19% get promoted into a central office position, 19% return to a lower school position, e.g., teacher, and 4% transfer to an across-district school, i.e., school outside of their original

district (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Many of those principals left due to stress, excessive demand on their time, feelings of isolation, and declining student achievement (Burkhauser et al., 2012). These findings suggest that entry-level administrators are placed in leadership positions without the proper preparation or support, and their attrition results in lower student achievement, erosion of teacher morale, and interruption in the implementation of school reforms (Blanchard et al., 2019).

Without intervention, Tennessee’s educational improvement efforts will be limited if leaders are dissatisfied or feel unprepared to successfully complete the instructional leadership responsibilities of their positions. Furthermore, preparing leaders to serve and stay in rural schools requires an array of skill development unique to the rural context.

### **Connecting Practice to Theory**

A review of current literature reveals limited research regarding the use and impact of ‘grow your own’ models of leadership in rural schools. “‘Grow your own’ principal preparation programs are becoming more common in large school districts, but the literature on ‘grow your own’ principal preparation programs is scarce” (Joseph, 2010, p. 2), and this includes those for rural districts as well. The capacity of small rural districts to create, fund, and implement leadership programs depends on available resources and partnerships with institutions of higher education and other supporting entities. “Because

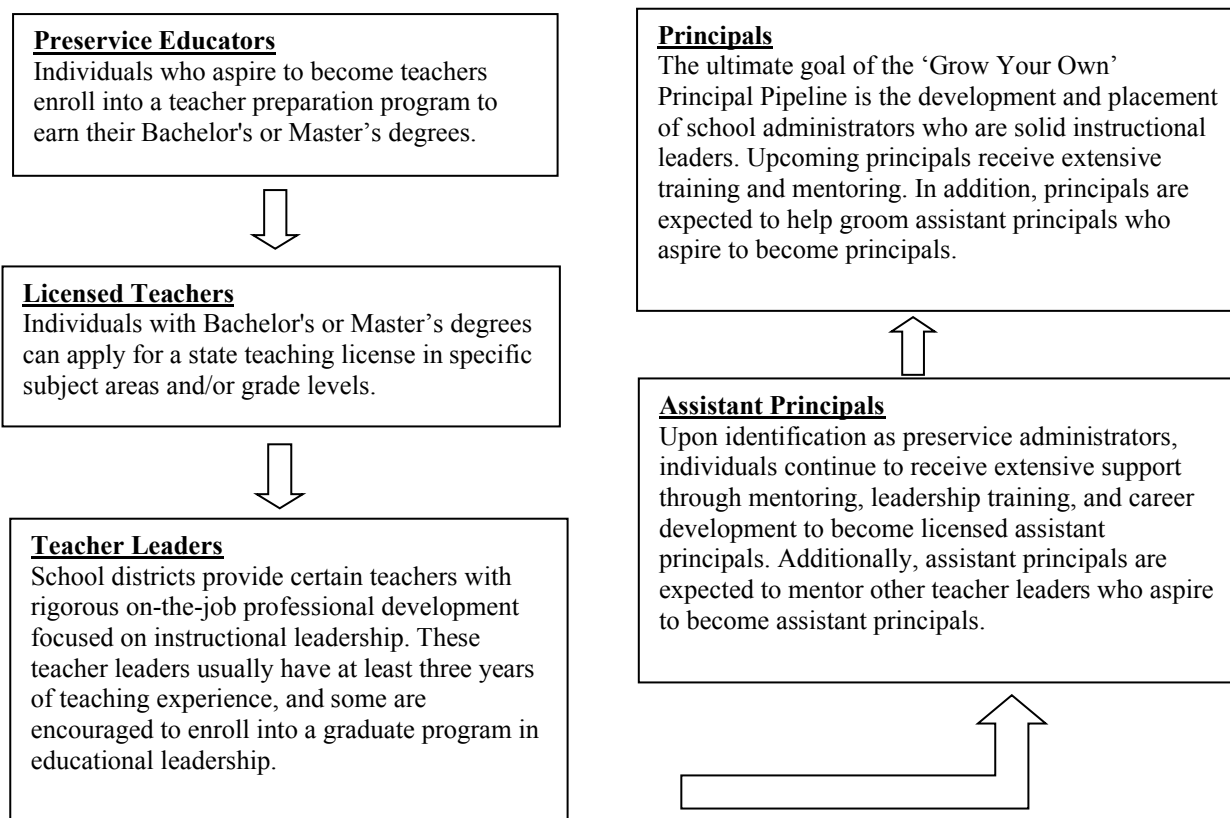


Figure 1: The 'Grow Your Own' Principal Pipeline

Note. Not all individuals progress through the pipeline in the ascribed manner, e.g., only some teacher leaders become assistant principals and some assistant principals become principals.

rural leaders frequently lead single administrator schools or districts, the need for purposeful mentoring between districts and universities is vital in ensuring that new leaders are provided the support and encouragement for developing skills in all facets of school leadership” (Versland, 2013, p. 4). While ‘grow your own’ programs are on the rise, the examination of those programs for quality and effectiveness remains limited. More research is needed to explore the benefits and shortcomings of these types of programs.

### Developing Leaders from Within

In order to address the looming and increasing need for administrators in rural areas, one must understand the characteristics essential for effective rural educators in the United States. York-Barr and Duke (2004) developed the concept of teachers as leaders years ago. Teachers who develop as leaders display attributes that Dempsey educated both inside and outside the classroom. The promising practice of

developing teachers as leaders is one of the most effective ways to grow leaders from within. Dempsey’s theory of teacher leadership (1992) outlined four attributes of effective teacher leaders: (1) a fully functioning person, (2) a reflective practitioner, (3) a scholarly teaching mindset, and (4) a united partner in learning. There is conceptual overlap between what constitutes a professional teacher and an exceptional teacher who aspires to become an administrator. Hunzicker (2019) addressed this issue by detailing the professional qualities identified as characteristics of effective teachers versus those constructs of teacher leaders identified by national leadership organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA), as noted in the Teacher Leadership Institute for Organizational Competencies (NEA, 2018). The attributes of leading with vision and skills, advocacy and organization, building culture within the workplace, and recognizing the capacity of others are all overarching competencies for teacher leaders. These qualities are unique to teacher leadership rather

than job qualities and professionalism expected from all teachers. For the purpose of this article, the term teacher leader refers to those teachers identified as aspiring administrators who display the attributes of leadership.

It is difficult to distinguish between high-quality teachers and teachers considered by administrators to be teacher leaders. In most instances, the distinguishing factors are contextual. For example, the responsibilities given to the teacher by the administration, the level of decision-making allowed, the responsibilities given outside of the classroom, and initiatives taken by the teacher leader are all considerations. As districts use teacher leaders as one of the primary sources for the principal pipeline, developing an environment that encourages teacher leadership growth from within is critical. Teacher leaders are individuals viewed as leaders from both inside and outside the classroom.

Other teachers see these leaders within the ranks as professionals who collaborate with others, demonstrate strong relationships with all stakeholders, and assume the position as role models and mentors for other teachers. According to Anderson (2008), successful teacher leaders have the potential to influence change within the school and in the community. Teacher leaders in rural communities understand the unique contextual attributes of their community; they understand the economic, geographical, social, and political dynamics of their environment. Successful teacher leaders are equipped with the tools necessary to lead others in the community. These aspiring leaders have the social skills, emotional intelligence, and academic knowledge to influence and evoke change. Teacher leaders are individuals with close relationships in the community who have the ability to collaborate with all stakeholders in the community. These teacher leaders understand the challenges and complexities of rural education because they have the “lived experiences” of being life-long members of these communities.

Rural educators may feel isolated and many times may lack the professional development needed for improvement (Hayes et al., 2019). Empowering strong teachers with professional development that is tailored to the unique needs of the rural school is the catalyst for creating a shared vision for a rural community. Selecting and preparing teacher leaders who can unify a school and create a shared vision for improvement will generate professionalism and a sense of unity for teachers and community leaders

(Eargle, 2013). Preparing teacher leaders to mentor others is one step to school improvement initiatives. In order to grow teacher leaders to fill the increasing void of rural administrators, the work of empowering teachers with leadership attributes must begin within the districts themselves. Developing a culture of learning, empowerment, and continuous improvement is essential for strengthening the pipeline for teacher leaders to become school administrators.

### **Recruiting Educational Leaders**

Incentives for continuing education offer the potential for increasing enrollment in educational leadership programs in higher education. Rural school districts and universities have opportunities to collaborate and compete for grants and other resources to enhance their capacity for the delivery of quality programs. “School districts and schools of education have the power to collaborate to create substantive, meaningful experiences that can adequately give principal candidates relevant theory and relevant experiences to lead schools of excellence” (Joseph, 2010, p. 12). On the other hand, “lack of mentoring, low salaries, geographic isolation, and scarce resources make recruiting quality candidates extremely challenging” (Versland, 2013, p. 14; see also Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Collaborations between rural school districts and universities are essential for developing lasting relationships that will sustain the promising practice of transforming teacher leaders into rural school administrators.

Findings from Warren and Peel (2005) indicated that collaborations between rural communities and local universities are essential to create leaders for rural reform. Rural districts and university collaboration must be built upon a foundation of trust and mutual interest of improvement. Teacher leaders involved in district and university partnerships are able to achieve school reform, increase collaboration, and improve the sense of unity. A ‘grow your own’ model for increasing numbers of school administrators in rural communities is one method of increasing the number of effective school leaders throughout a state. Recruiting future administrators from teacher leaders will enable the pool to represent the values of the community and to be partners in education, so that those who value education and professional growth will help fulfill the growing

demand for educational leadership in rural communities.

### Description of the Practice

To become an educational administrator in the state of Tennessee, an administrative license is required. There are two administrative licenses issued by the Tennessee Department of Education: 1) the Instructional Leadership License – Aspiring (ILL-A) is the initial administrative license issued, and 2) the Instructional Leadership License (ILL) is the advanced administrative license, usually earned after you have at least three years of work experience under the ILL-A and have completed the necessary professional development activities for school leaders (TDOE, 2021). In order to receive the ILL, one must complete and be recommended for licensure by a state-approved graduate program in school administration and supervision or educational leadership, pass a Praxis examination, have a valid education license with at least three years of education experience, and complete an internship during the graduate program (TDOE, 2021).

### Context: The Educational Leadership Landscape in Tennessee

To examine the demand for educational leaders in the state of Tennessee, county trends for district and school administrators are important. Comparatively, over two-thirds (69/95) of all counties in Tennessee showed a net increase in the number of educational administrators in recent years, which is primarily due to increases in and based on student enrollment (TDOE, 2021). Although the metropolitan area of Shelby County (40.0%) reported the largest growth in administrator numbers in the state with a statewide compound annual growth rate

of 7.0%, rural counties, or counties with an Index of Relative Rurality (IRR) greater than or equal to 0.4, that reported strong (i.e., >10%) growth include Clay (15.5%), Cheatham (15.3%), Hancock (14.4%), McMinn (13.6%), White (13.6%), and Pickett (10.7%) counties (see Table 1). Despite this increase in demand for educational administrators across the state, including in many rural counties, much of the focus in meeting this demand centers on metropolitan areas like Shelby County. Concerning the supply of educational leaders within the state, Tennessee is ranked ninth by number of doctoral level educational leadership degree conferrals in 2016 with 150 (see Table 2). The top five states - California, Texas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Illinois - have high population centers where a large number conferrals would be expected. This outsized supply of educational leaders for a state ranked 17th in terms of overall population is due to the increased demand for elementary and secondary school administrators within the state.

Alarming, in the past three years since the last Why Rural Matters report, 22 states have decreased their state contributions for every local dollar invested in rural schools. Tennessee has seen the greatest drop of \$1.68, down from \$2.11, per local dollar (Showalter et al., 2019). With this drastic drop in funding, unique programs and avenues must be investigated to reverse these trends. To sustain the supply chain and meet the increasing demand for educational leaders, there must be adequate state and federal funding and policy reform that focuses on the unique complexities of rural America. The ‘grow your own’ leadership preparation program is one way to address this downward spiral. Once aspiring leaders are identified within rural districts, resources must be allocated to these districts and these individuals so that the gap of prepared professionals

Table 1  
Administrator Counts for Tennessee Counties with Highest Growth, 2012-2017

County	IRR	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Percent Change	Rank
Shelby County	0.133	169	169	656	507	605	650	40.0%	1
Clay County	0.609	9	14	11	10	13	16	15.5%	2
Cheatham County	0.462	17	18	21	24	27	30	15.3%	3
Hancock County	0.574	7	10	8	9	11	12	14.4%	4
McMinn County	0.407	18	30	32	33	32	30	13.6%	5
White County	0.511	12	19	17	17	18	20	13.6%	6
Pickett County	0.633	4	5	5	6	6	6	10.7%	7
Sumner County	0.289	107	115	108	127	147	159	10.4%	8

Statewide	3742	4475	4427	4246	4621	4913	7.0%
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Table 2

Top Ten States for Number of Doctoral Degree Conferrals in Educational Leadership 2012-2016

State	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Percent Change	Percent of Total	Rank
California	610	692	632	737	669	2.3%	3.6%	1
Texas	291	382	309	349	400	8.3%	3.7%	2
Pennsylvania	214	184	234	225	264	5.4%	2.6%	3
Virginia	115	121	194	184	214	16.8%	4.1%	4
Illinois	135	163	185	228	201	10.5%	2.3%	5
Arizona	247	224	258	223	168	-9.2%	4.7%	6
North Carolina	111	124	121	168	154	8.5%	3.1%	7
Florida	220	208	204	167	151	-9.0%	1.7%	8
Tennessee	119	133	138	142	150	6.0%	4.1%	9
Minnesota	153	107	149	150	137	-2.7%	2.5%	10
Nationwide	3,573	3,835	3,981	4,356	4,229	4.3%	100%	

to enter the administrative ranks is filled.

Collaborative efforts between rural school districts and local universities are key in working together on the unique challenges of educating rural students. Warren and Peel (2005) described a collaborative model that actively engages rural school districts and institutions of higher education that establishes a vision for unity, shared ownership, trust, and collegiality. These unique partnerships that deliberately align the professional development needs of the teacher leader will result in the seamless transition from teacher leader to effective rural administrator.

### Solution: Details and Examples from ‘Grow Your Own’ Leadership Preparation Programs

One Tennessee university pilot program continues to provide quality training for aspiring teachers and educational leaders who pursue higher education goals. The Eriksson College of Education at Austin Peay State University offers learning opportunities for undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students seeking to fill leadership roles in rural schools. Its Center for Rural Education (CRE) operates with a mission focused on the unique needs of rural students, teachers, and administrators. In keeping with the ‘grow your own’ model, the CRE identifies education students from rural communities, provides opportunities for quality educational experiences, and supports their return to rural communities as licensed teachers and administrators.

Furthermore, the Rural Education Scholars program, from the same college, consists of education students meeting the qualifications of acceptance into the program. These preservice

educators collaborate on developing instructional materials to support rural school districts, planning workshops, and recruiting candidates from rural areas for careers in education. This dovetails well with the features of a successful ‘grow your own’ leadership preparation program, which include:

- an application process that is strong in its rigor and clarity, with an assessment of participant readiness to delve into issues of equity;
- job-embedded assessments that add to the adult learning of the program and help to prepare students for leadership roles, with an opportunity to deepen collaboration both between participants, through the use of a cohort model, and with faculty members, mentor principals, coaches, and districts;
- professional coaching that is a solid part of the program and involves proven educational leaders;
- a strong curriculum and sequence that has deep connections between the courses, with common themes like equity and the proper use of technology; and
- a strengthening of the relationship between partner district and college, so that the program can continue to attract a diverse group of participants to enhance the principal pipeline.

The first Rural Education Scholars will graduate in the Fall of 2020 and return to their rural communities with licenses from the Tennessee Department of Education. Continuing the ‘grow your own’ model, these newly licensed teachers expressed interest in pursuing leadership roles in educational administration. As higher education entities in Tennessee continue to support ‘grow your own’

models with programs such as assistant principal networks and doctoral leadership programs which include rural school candidates, the trends toward leadership growth in rural schools will continue to enhance rural education in Tennessee and beyond.

According to Brown (2018), an externally funded program to reform administrative leaders in schools in North Carolina also produced positive results. Novice administrators returning to their home districts felt a sense of accomplishment and were equipped with the “will and the skill” to be a turnaround principal. Participants in this North Carolina program, like the ones in the Tennessee pilot program, developed the skills to effectively turn around low-performing schools and engage with all stakeholders in the community.

### Conclusions

#### Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on current literature and data, there are implications for policy and practice in rural school districts and higher education institutions. Both entities would benefit from a symbiotic relationship that should present countless benefits to students in rural schools when they are fully staffed by certified, trained educators. Rural school districts should consider creating and/or strengthening assistant principal professional development programs. Another suggestion is to develop a ‘grow your own’ leadership program. For higher education institutions, it may help to create a fully online master’s degree in educational administration that would lead to school administrator licensure and a ‘grow your own’ teacher program that would feed into the principal pipeline.

**Professional Development of Assistant Principals.** According to a national principal survey, it was reported that principals in rural public schools were more likely to exit the profession than principals located in other geographical areas (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). In response to this issue, rural school districts should provide current assistant principals with a mentor, relevant and continuous professional development, and network opportunities with fellow assistant principals to increase retention and to strengthen the principal pipeline. Research has claimed assistant principals’ first-year experience is critical in determining retention rate and job satisfaction. According to one rural assistant

principal, the limited communication regarding expectations in terms of the leadership role, division of duties, etc. led to uncertainty and confusion on the job. At times, this resulted in negative critiques of job performance (J. Cary, personal communication, February 17, 2021). According to Versland (2018), new leaders “may not have yet mastered certain organizational and relational skills, they are likely to make more mistakes, inviting criticism from teachers and others” (p. 16). This could lead to the principals’ doubting their leadership capabilities even with small matters (Bandura, 2009). Hence, there should be an emphasis on ensuring that assistant principals are aware of their job functions and expectations.

Due to the expansive size of many rural school districts, it is suggested that the design of a professional development program is flexible and accommodates assistant principals who are unable to travel to central office. Thus, a possible alternative is to provide a monthly assistant principal professional development program that can be delivered in a hybrid format. Throughout each monthly session, assistant principals should be provided with relevant learning opportunities that will enhance their job performance. In addition to the structured learning environment, the opportunity for fellow assistant principals to network can help build support, morale, and collegiality (Cohen & Schechter, 2019).

**‘Grow Your Own’ Leadership Preparation Program.** According to one rural district leader in response to a Center for Rural Education, Austin Peay State University, survey conducted March, 2018, “being in tune with specific needs of rural school districts and readily willing to meet those needs” are necessary qualities for rural district educators. District leaders also identified professional development needs based on teacher evaluation outcomes, such as “strategies for intervention, discipline, and instructional strategies to meet the standards more rigorously.” Preparation programs should design opportunities to intentionally strengthen these qualities in rural candidates.

Moreover, “in any profession dedicated to serving others, it is crucial to put candidates to the test prior to initial credentialing by having them demonstrate mastery of essential competencies under the watchful eyes of practitioner mentors” (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d., p. 11). There are opportunities for effective collaboration between rural school districts and universities to design a program that will provide aspiring teacher leaders

with a holistic learning opportunity (Hildreth et al., 2018) through a 'grow your own' leadership program. These preservice leaders would be afforded the opportunity to learn and grow by performing assignments of an assistant principal.

As aspiring teacher leaders enter into the role of assistant principals, it is crucial that they are receiving adequate on the job training. Similar to resident physicians who undergo years of intense training to prepare for a career to practice medicine, they are mandated to prove mastery prior to graduating residency. Therefore, the field of education should provide aspiring teacher leaders with opportunities to demonstrate mastery as a competent future school leader prior to being installed as an assistant principal. Suggesting the alternative and expecting new assistant principals to learn on the job in an era of increased school accountability is "counterproductive but helps explain why school reform efforts so often sputter and die out" (Southern Regional Education Board, n.d., p. 9). Cohen and Schechter (2019) described the process of teacher leaders becoming assistant principals as "a complicated transition having an emotional, social and professional effect, described in terms of shock and an unpleasant surprise" (p. 99). A well-designed 'grow your own' leadership program can provide a smoother transition for aspiring teacher leaders as they assume the roles of assistant principals.

**Fully Online Master's Program in Educational Administration.** Higher education institutions can help to develop the assistant principal pipeline in rural communities. For instance, a college of education can design a fully online master's degree program delivered asynchronously with a specialized curriculum that is current, relevant, and has a job-embedded focus. Although theory is essential in many higher education courses, it is equally important for higher education institutions to realize that aspiring teacher leaders are expected to proficiently perform the duties of an assistant principal on the first day of the job. Therefore, it is critical that the course design would help aspiring teacher leaders to realize the connection between what they are expected to learn in each course and its applicability to the role of a future assistant principal.

**'Grow Your Own' Teacher Preparation Program.** Although there is a growing need of hiring qualified school and district leaders in rural counties,

there is also a dilemma of the shortage of qualified, highly certified teachers who are willing to teach in those areas. "Geographic isolation, poor teacher compensation, and dispersed leadership structures contribute further to the difficulties that rural schools face in attracting and retaining effective teachers, particularly the most talented beginning teachers" (Hayes et al., 2019, p. 1). Therefore, rural school districts can collaborate with higher education institutions to create a 'grow your own' teacher program that would meet the demands of new teacher hire, especially in the critical needs area.

The 'grow your own' teacher program would be comprised of local high students who aspire to become future teachers. The program design would include assigning a mentor to each aspiring teacher and providing "on the job" training. Therefore, the aspiring teachers would be expected to perform some duties of a teacher. Upon graduating high school, these aspiring teachers would be well-prepared for the expectations of starting a teacher education preparation program with the aspirations of becoming future teachers and leaders in rural school districts.

### **Significance of the Practice**

The downward trend of the lack of prepared administrators across the United States is alarming. Policymakers are aware of the shortage of qualified educational administrators. In this age of increased accountability, the school administrator is key to quality school reform and student achievement. When university educational leadership preparation programs and school districts work together to select, groom, educate, and mentor aspiring school leaders, hiring practices, working conditions, and retention efforts of teacher leaders and administrators will improve (McConnell, 2020).

The shortage of qualified administrators extends to the rural community, where "one in five students, one in three schools, and one in two districts are located" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 27). Many rural school districts pose the unique grouped challenge of poverty, low student achievement, low teacher salaries, and a lower tax base (Lavalley, 2018; Showalter et al., 2019). As Lavalley (2018) elaborated in her report on the state of rural schools:

Conditions of deep, persistent poverty present in many communities' compound existing problems for students, staff, and schools. Rural students struggle with low achievement and fewer opportunities to take advanced courses, while

their teachers arrive to the classroom less academically prepared than their metropolitan counterparts. Both teachers and principals in rural areas have limited access to quality professional development, further hampering the potential for rural schools to grow and develop effective educators. Districts, facing budget cuts and pressured to share limited resources, have turned to consolidating schools, creating burdens on students and family life.

At every level, education systems in rural communities confront a set of obstacles that stem from circumstances of the surrounding environment. These challenges are specifically rural in nature, and require solutions designed for the rural classroom. (pp. 26-27)

The promising practice of building leaders from within is one way to address this trend. Identifying

teachers with leadership qualities who have the content knowledge, emotional intelligence, and a professional disposition is essential for building the rural administrator pipeline. The challenges facing rural educators are unique; identifying strong teacher leaders who can meet these challenges is a critical initial step in this process. School district and university partnerships working collaboratively to meet the supply of and demand for rural administrators are the key to quality preparation of teachers and administrators. State and federal support are essential; recognizing and supporting collaborative efforts with policy reform, funding opportunities, and professional development opportunities unique to rural education will ultimately begin to turn the tide on preparing and retaining rural school administrators.

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