



Montana Small Schools Alliance

***Frontier Schools in Montana:
Challenges and Sustainability Practices***

A Research Report

By

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Funded by the Oro y Plata Foundation

June 3, 2010



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About the Montana Small Schools Alliance (MSSA)

Created in 1996, the Montana Small Schools Alliance is a non-profit organization with a purpose to provide professional development, research, resources, and technical assistance to help Montana's small schools meet state and federal mandates in educationally sound ways. The organization was created by The Montana Association of County School Superintendents, the Montana Rural Education Center UM-Western, the College of Education, Health and Human Development MSU-Bozeman, and the Montana School Boards Association.

Examples of MSSA programs include the Montana Small Schools Professional Development and Curriculum Consortium which has provided more than 300 day-long workshops to multi-grade school districts and small K-12 districts to help them create curriculum, instruction, and assessments for meeting state standards. The MSSA-MAP Quality Student Assessment Program enables school districts with a student body of less than 200 students to receive special rates in using the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measure's of Academic Progress (MAP) in a student growth model assessment system.

After 10 years of research, MSSA worked with the Montana Unified School Trust in designing affordable health insurance for small schools. MSSA also offers graduate classes with Alliance partner, the College of Education, Health and Human Development, Montana State University-Bozeman.

As a state-affiliate of the National Rural Education Association (NREA), Montana rural school educators and students gain recognition and grants. Montana students have taken top honors in the NREA Student Essay Contests. Montana teachers have received NREA mini-grants. A previous state Rural Teacher of the Year was selected as the National Rural Teacher of the Year, and two other state winners have been finalists in the national program. Also, MSSA's director received the NREA Distinguished Service Award.

MSSA has conducted a variety of research projects. Examples have included a study conducted at the request of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Studies entitled *The Challenges and Best Practices of Small, Rural Schools in Montana in Implementing The No Child Left Behind Act*. MSSA has conducted four studies on technology use and connectivity of small schools in Montana; four studies over 14 years formally known as The Montana Rural Schools Salary and Benefits Survey; and *The Social Security Study* requested by the Montana Association of County Superintendents of Schools to determine how many and which schools do not provide Social Security Benefits to their employees.

In 2008 the Montana Small Schools Alliance began a major research project, *The Frontier Schools Project*. The project seeks to increase the understanding of Montana's frontier schools, defined as a school district with 200 or fewer students and its attendant community located in a county with five or fewer people per square mile.



About the Authors

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Dr. Claudette Morton, Executive Director of the Montana Small Schools Alliance, is nationally recognized for her action research and understanding of the implications of education public policy on small rural schools. She has worked as a college administrator, staff member of the Montana state education agency, and administrator for the Montana Board of Public Education. She has served on numerous taskforces and committees, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the National Governors' Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Rural Education Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Northwest Education Regional Laboratory and many state commissions. Dr. Morton has taught grades seven through graduate school and holds an adjunct professor appointment at Montana State University. She serves on the editorial board of *The Rural Educator* and has served as guest editor. Dr. Morton's research has been used by numerous Montana agencies, including the Governor's Office, the legislature, the public service commission, and the Office of Public Instruction. Dr. Morton earned Bachelor's of Arts, Master's and the Doctorate in Education degrees from the University of Montana.



Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the many persons who helped make possible this study and research report of small, rural “frontier” school districts in Montana. These include:

Board members of the Montana Small Schools Alliance, who expressed a high interest in the project and continued their strong commitment to ensuring the Alliance understands and serves the needs of all rural schools in the state, including those located in remote places on the Montana “frontier.”

The Oro Y Plata Foundation, who generously provided funding that enabled the Montana Small Schools Alliance to carry out this “Frontier Schools” project to increase understanding about and assistance to the small, rural schools and their communities in the most remote places of the state.

Dr. Boyd Dressler, whose assistance in development of the MSSA frontier schools project and conduct of the Phase One study was invaluable and greatly appreciated.

Study participants in frontier school districts, including teachers, administrators, board chairs, and community members who volunteered their time to complete surveys or travel long distances to participate in a focus group session. Without their generous contribution of time, knowledge and insights the study would have been impossible.

School district superintendents and educators in the four districts who volunteered to participate in pilot testing of the survey instrument.

County superintendents and regional service area leaders, who assisted in dissemination of information about the study and encouraged completion of surveys or participation in focus group sessions.

Paula Dressler, who transferred data from surveys collected in Phase One of the study into Excel spread sheets.

Prudence Gildroy, who transcribed the recording of the focus groups sessions into written text.

Paul Harmon, who designed the layout of the report and provided essential editing tasks.

Erin Murphy, who provided general assistance to the project.



Executive Summary

What makes Montana’s “frontier schools” unique? Over 200 school districts with 200 or fewer students dot the rural landscape in Montana. Across the United States, over 1,000 school districts with 200 or fewer students remain in rural areas. So small are these school districts that national studies seldom pay attention to them. This report presents results and conclusions from a study of the Montana Small School Alliance (MSSA) frontier schools project. The purpose of the study was to ascertain the perceptions of teachers, administrators, board chairs and community supporters regarding the challenges confronting small, rural “frontier” schools in Montana and the practices that are contributing to their sustainability.

Frontier Schools Defined

Montana “frontier schools” is defined as a school located in a district with 200 or fewer students and its attendant community located in a county with five or fewer people per square mile. In Montana, 42 of the 56 counties have fewer than five people per square. Consequently, this became the defined geographic area for the MSSA Frontier Schools project. A review of 2008 student enrollment data from the Montana Office of Public Instruction and the list of school districts in the five Montana Regional Service Areas revealed 141 districts enrolled 200 or fewer students in the 42 counties.

Methods

A total of 141 Frontier school districts in 42 counties comprised the target population for the study. The study was conducted in two phases from February 2009 to April 2010. A survey was developed for school district personnel based on a study of K-12 unit schools in the United States by Howley and Harmon (2000). The survey instrument was pilot tested over a two-month period with four school districts in the fall of 2008. Slight modifications were made in the original survey to clarify selected questions.

In phase one, a paper-and-pencil version of the survey was administered to collect data and information from school district personnel who attended five scheduled professional development MSSA workshops in February and March of 2009. In phase two, the survey was administered as a web survey using Survey Monkey. The survey was posted on the MSSA web site in January 2010 to solicit response from personnel in the Frontier school districts who had not participated in the workshops.

The survey contained 20 questions. School district personnel in the MSSA workshops and web survey participants were asked to provide demographic information, current school district challenges, and practices that may have contributed to the sustainability of the school. In phase two, a related paper and pencil survey was also developed and mailed to the chairperson of the school board for Frontier school districts in January 2010.

One question included on both school personnel and board chair surveys asked respondents to identify two community members not employed by the school district that were strong supporters of the school and knew its value to the community or area the school served. One follow-up effort was conducted to solicit additional surveys from non-respondents. County superintendents and regional service area directors were also asked to disseminate information about the study to encourage response.

Lastly, in phase two, the researchers conducted six focus groups with persons identified on returned surveys as local supporters of the frontier schools. The MSSA office contacted the school advocates for which phone numbers were provided on the survey. Additionally, MSSA contacts in the region were asked to encourage these lay citizens to attend a focus group session. A focus group protocol was developed by the researchers for conducting the focus group sessions. One researcher facilitated the protocol (consultant), while the second researcher (MSSA director) served as note taker. The focus group sessions were conducted in March and April of 2010 in restaurants at a regional location convenient to invited participants. Sessions were held from 6 to 8:30 pm with dinner provided. Focus group sessions were recorded, with written transcriptions produced by a professional transcriber.

A total of 237 school district personnel returned completed surveys. The chairs of 57 school boards (40%) completed the paper and pencil survey. Forty-nine community supporters of frontier schools participated in the six focus groups sessions held across the state. A Cronbach alpha reliability procedure was conducted on the scale of importance ratings for the eight sustainability reasons in the school district personnel survey ($\alpha=.816$) and board chair survey ($\alpha=.709$).

Conclusions

Based on the findings from the analysis of surveys and focus group results, several conclusions are drawn for this study of frontier school districts in Montana.

1. K-8 elementary school districts comprise the vast majority of “Frontier Schools” in Montana.
2. Generally, teacher turnover is high in the frontier school districts with the majority of teachers having less than five years of experience in the district.
3. A Bachelor’s degree is the highest level of educational attainment for the majority of teachers in frontier school districts.
4. Montana institutions of higher education produce the vast majority of educators who work in frontier school districts.
5. Generally, the vast majority of board chairs in frontier school districts have served four to ten years on the board of education, with about half of board chairs serving as chair of the board of education between one and three years.
6. Frontier school districts have small student enrollments, with more than half enrolling less than 30 students.
7. Frontier school districts of workshop participants may include a substantial portion of impoverished students, with more than four in ten districts comprised of more than 40 percent of students eligible for the free and reduced price lunch program.

8. Agriculture is the most prevalent economic base in the vast majority of frontier school districts.

9. Top five major challenges (most pressing issues) in frontier school districts are low student enrollment, unrealistic federal regulations, inadequate financial resources, mixed grade levels of students in classroom, and difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s).

10. Few frontier schools, comprised primarily of K-8 elementary school districts, have major challenges related to illegal drugs, meeting teacher certification requirements, student use of alcohol, inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity), inadequate curriculum/course offerings, and inadequate number of support staff.

11. Frontier school districts explain low student enrollment as a trend with major consequences. Their concerns are expressed in statements such as: “Enrollment has dropped over the years.” “As students graduate, we only have one [student] or so trickling in--so enrollment is dropping.” “If enrollment becomes too low will good teachers be laid off? Eventually will the school be closed?” “Low student enrollment leads to low funding and threat of consolidation/closure.” “Our enrollment has been dropping these past few years, and this year we lose our largest number when the 8th grade graduates. We have few children coming up--only one pre-school and no kindergarten. We have to cut back on staff.”

12. Frontier school districts face “inadequate financial resources” with enormous impact on students and teachers, expressed in statements such as: “I would like to see more equipment, more field trips, and more resources for our students. Pay for teachers so they can stay would help.” “Our school (like many rural schools) is constantly struggling financially, which leads to higher teacher turnover rates (teachers leave for better pay).” “The school needs to update/fix physical issues at the school but cannot fund them.” “We never have enough money to provide the proper education materials.” “Teacher pay is really low but schools can’t squeeze anymore pennies for them.” “Money is based on ANB [i.e., student count] and land taxes.”

13. “Mixed grade levels of students in the classroom” presents frontier school districts with special issues, as illustrated in the following statements: “Federal requirements are not specifically applicable to my student population from year to year.” “Teachers and staff expected to “know it all” by counselors, nurses, etc.” “With the funding being so low, we can’t keep up with changes in textbooks for grades. We haven’t the money to buy updates and new technology.”

14. “Unrealistic federal expectations” is a major issue in frontier school districts, as illustrated by the following statements: “Can’t spend the money where we need to.” “Our school lost our title program because of the last Census; the mine that supports our community is closing its doors.” “Our school’s members are getting smaller, students are going to neighboring schools earlier and that larger school is trying to consolidate.” “A neighboring district is eager for our enrollment numbers. There is pressure to consolidate from outside the community.”

15. Frontier school districts operate mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms and use school facilities to serve critical community functions as key general practices that contribute to school sustainability.

16. Staffing practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability include making special in-service opportunities available for teachers, creating partnerships with other districts, employing teacher(s) with multiple endorsements, passing local levies, and promoting the reputation of the school.

17. Fiscal practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability include seeking bids and comparison pricing for all purchases, forming a consortium of school districts to leverage resources, cooperating with other districts for specialized personnel, increasing student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten), and hiring teachers on low end of district pay scale.
18. Distance learning technology practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability primarily include delivering professional development opportunities for teachers and provided enrichment experiences for students.
19. Importance of the school to the community in educating children and/or youth is the primary reason that has been the most important consideration for sustaining the small rural public school(s) in the frontier school districts. However, school board chairs and community supporters of the schools also consider meeting community development functions and needs somewhat more important as a consideration in sustaining the school compared to school district personnel.
20. Community supporters of the small frontier schools particularly consider the small school as highly effective in educating students because it enables teachers to provide students with one-on-one attention and because it makes possible a close, supportive relationship between parents and teachers where everyone knows each other, including students.
21. Community supporters of the small frontier schools view the school as an essential family support structure for choosing the way of life associated with working as ranchers and farmers in isolated areas of Montana.
22. Community supporters of the small frontier schools perceive the need to increase factual communications about the productivity of the small school to the broader general public, including providing politicians with facts about the school and its value to the community.



Frontier Schools in Montana: Challenges and Sustainability Practices

What makes Montana’s “frontier schools” unique? Over 200 school districts with 200 or fewer students dot the rural landscape in Montana. Across the United States, over 1,000 school districts with 200 or fewer students remain in rural areas. So small are these school districts that national studies seldom pay attention to them. Educational historians might see them as remnants of the “one-room” or “country” school. Researchers might view them as “outliers” or “anomalies” that seldom fit what ought to be considered “normal” today. Yet, these schools possess many of the characteristics that education reformers seek to implement today, such as a more personalized smaller learning environment for each student, better connection between the school and parents of students, and a focused curriculum that integrates academic and practical learning.

While advocates suggest that these uniquely small schools offer a learning environment that larger schools in urban areas can only dream about, small rural schools also face many challenges that jeopardize their future success, even existence. As a result the Montana Small Schools Alliance (MSSA) seeks to identify the school district challenges and practices, as well as community characteristics that make these very small “frontier” schools successful and sustainable.

Profiling the unique challenges facing these small schools will enable the Montana Small Schools Alliance and other organizations and agencies to develop possible solutions to the challenges confronting frontier school districts and provide supportive assistance. “Telling the story” of frontier schools and their communities in Montana can inform leaders and education reformers of other schools, large and small, about ways to implement key practices that serve students and communities well in a global economy.

Purpose of Study

This report presents results and conclusions of the Montana Small School Alliance (MSSA) frontier schools project. The purpose of the project was to identify the challenges confronting small, rural “frontier” schools in Montana and the practices that contribute to their sustainability. The study provided an opportunity for those most involved in the schools to describe their perceptions of the challenges and practices, particularly teachers, school board chairs, and community supporters of frontier schools.

Defining Frontier Schools

A workable definition of rural schools on the “frontier” has been elusive for educators and researchers. However, when the federal government added the Small, Rural School Achievement Program to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, they created a workable definition for allocating funds to intended school districts. It is a school district of 600 or fewer students in a county with a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile and has a U.S. Department of Education local code of 7 or 8 (US Department of Education, 2002).

Many rural education researchers in the western part of the United States considered this definition of rural as too inclusive. In Montana, for example, the definition included the majority of school districts in the state (McCulloch, 2008). While searching for a more accurate term and definition seemed like a relatively easy

task, it has proven to be the first challenge in this research that target schools on the Montana frontier. Early in the MSSA project, the principal investigators decided on the term “Frontier” to identify the schools and communities that are so small that they are actually a sub-group of rural America. The Frontier schools exist in places that are exceptionally remote, particularly in comparison to most rural schools in the eastern United States.

Although a review of literature in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) system contained considerable information on “one room schools,” no documents discussed the modern frontier school. A search of the internet revealed an organization called The National Center for Frontier Communities based in Ojo Sarco, New Mexico (see www.frontierus.org). The Center website proclaims it is “the only national organization dedicated to the smallest and most geographically isolated communities in the United States - the Frontier.” This group has been functioning for over 10 years and has considerable statistical data and a specific research program that developed a matrix for defining frontier. In 1997, using a methodology from the National Institutes of Health, the center convened a group of professionals who work in rural health and services to read background papers and develop a consensus on a matrix rather than a specific definition. Through several conference calls and a variety of communications the group worked for over a year. The matrix produced by the center’s group weighted factors for defining frontier in three areas. The first was density or persons per square mile, the second was distance to a market or service center, and the third was the time it took to drive to the nearest market or service center. Points were then distributed for each of these factors and a scale of “frontierness” was determined (see www.frontiersus.org).

While relevant, the matrix was not satisfactory for the Montana frontier schools project because of the sliding scale features. Consequently, using the National Center for Frontier Communities’ work as a beginning the researchers considered various Montana features of frontier and created an operational definition for the project. A Montana frontier school is defined as a school district with 200 or fewer students and its attendant community located in a county with five or fewer people per square mile. The 200-student maximum defined a much smaller school district than the federal definition of 600 developed for the Small, Rural School Achievement Program. The determination of remoteness embraced a county with five or fewer persons per square mile. Because the school age population in Montana is approximately one-fifth or 20 percent of the general population (CEIS-Montana, July 2008), a county with five people per square mile would on average have only one student per square mile.

In Montana, 42 of the 56 counties have fewer than five people per square mile (CEIS-Montana, July 2008). Consequently, this became the defined geographic area for the MSSA Frontier Schools project. A review of 2008 student enrollment data from the Montana Office of Public Instruction (McCulloch, 2008) and the list of school districts in the five Montana Regional Service Areas revealed 141 districts enrolled 200 or fewer students in the 42 counties.

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In phase one, a paper-and-pencil version of the survey was administered to collect data and information from school district personnel who attended five scheduled professional development MSSA workshops in February and March of 2009. In phase two, the survey was administered as a web survey using Survey Monkey. A link to the survey was posted on the MSSA web site in January 2010 to solicit response from personnel in the Frontier school districts who had not participated in the workshops.

The survey contained 20 questions. Workshop participants were asked to provide demographic information, current school district challenges, and practices that may have contributed to the sustainability of the school. In phase two, a related paper and pencil survey was also developed and mailed to the chairperson of the school board for Frontier school districts in January 2010. One question that the surveys asked of all participants was to identify two community members not employed by the school district who were strong advocates of the school and knew its value to the community or area the school serves.

One of the investigators in the study, also the director of the Montana Small Schools Alliance, administered the survey and collected completed surveys from participants at the February and March, 2009 workshop sessions. The MSSA office also mailed the school board chair survey in January 2010, with a timeline of one month to respond. One follow-up effort was conducted to solicit additional surveys from non-respondents. County superintendents and regional service center directors were also asked to disseminate information about the study to encourage response.

Lastly, in phase two the researchers conducted six focus groups with persons identified on returned surveys as local supporters of the frontier schools. The MSSA office contacted the school advocates for which phone numbers were provided on the survey. Additionally, MSSA contacts in the region were asked to encourage these lay citizens to attend the focus group session. A focus group protocol was developed by the researchers for conducting the focus group sessions. One researcher facilitated the protocol (consultant), while the second researcher (MSSA director) served as note taker. The focus group sessions were conducted in March and April of 2010 in restaurants at a regional location convenient to invited participants. Sessions were held from 6 to 8:30 pm with dinner provided. Focus group sessions were recorded, with written transcriptions produced by a professional transcriber.

A total of 237 school district personnel returned completed surveys. The chairs of 57 school boards (40%) completed the paper and pencil survey. Forty-nine community supporters of frontier schools participated in the six focus groups sessions held across the state. A Cronbach alpha reliability procedure was conducted on the scale of importance ratings for the eight sustainability reasons in the school district personnel survey ($\alpha=.816$) and the school board chair survey ($\alpha=.709$).

Results: School District Personnel Survey

Data from the completed 2009 survey of MSSA workshop participants ($n=92$) and 2010 web survey forms ($n=145$) were combined and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Demographic characteristics were profiled and major challenges of the school district were analyzed, followed by an analysis of practices that contributed to the sustainability of frontier schools. The analysis included ratings of respondents regarding the importance of selected reasons for sustaining the small rural school in the district. A Cronbach alpha reliability procedure was conducted on the scale of importance ratings for the eight sustainability reasons. The reliability coefficient was .816.

Personnel Characteristics

All respondents (n=237) who completed a survey may not have answered each question. Of the 237 respondents, 220 indicated the type of school district in which they were employed. Forty-four respondents (20%) were employed in a K-12 school district comprised of only one school in district; 34-four respondents (15.5%) were employed in a K-12 school district that had more than one school in the district (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Respondent by Type of School District

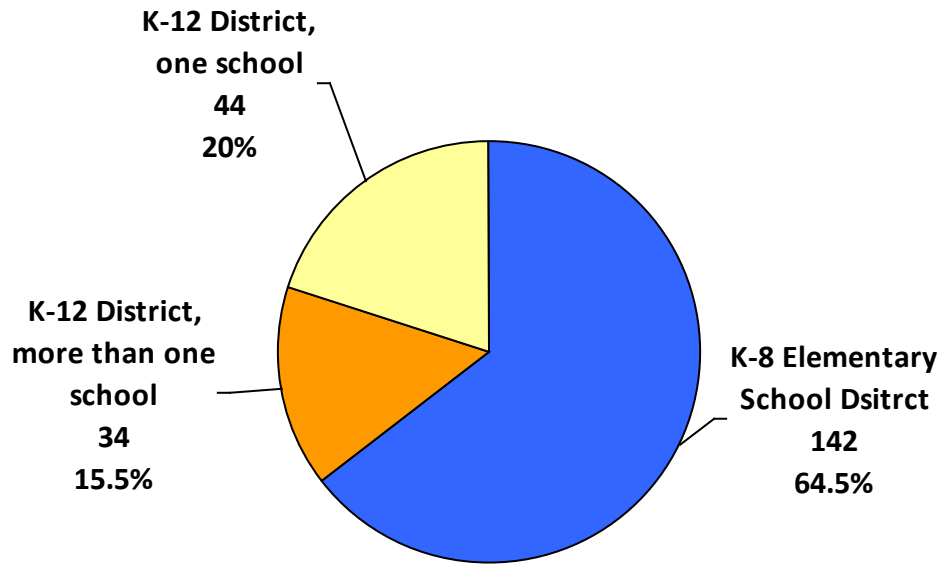


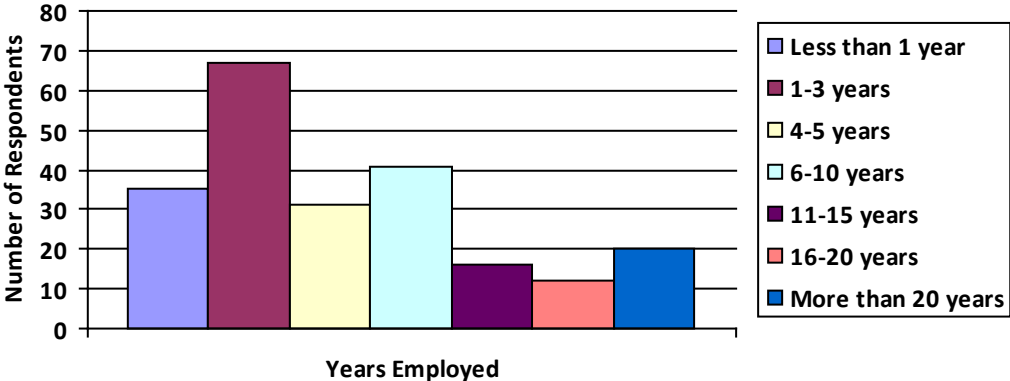
Table 1 shows 42, or 19.3 percent, of the 218 respondents indicated “County Superintendent” as their primary position of responsibility in the school district. Twenty-seven (12.4%) respondents indicated “District Superintendent/Lead Teacher.” Only six (2.8%) respondents indicated they served as “District Superintendent and School Principal,” while 98 (45.0%) respondents indicated “District Supervising Teacher.” Forty-six (19.7%) respondents were employed as Teachers, and two (0.9%) were employed as Clerks (business managers). In Montana, the District Supervising Teacher is a classroom teacher with additional duties that in a larger district would be assigned to a principal. The County Superintendent is the Superintendent for the small schools with no administrator.

Table 1. Respondent’s Primary Position of Responsibility in the School District

Position	No.	%
County Superintendent	42	19.3
District Superintendent/Lead Teacher	27	12.4
District Superintendent and School Principal	6	2.7
District Supervising Teacher	98	45.0
Teacher	46	19.7
Clerk	2	.9
Total	218	100.0

Slightly less than one-third of the respondents (67, or 30.1%) have been employed in their current position 1-3 years (see Figure 2). Forty-one (18.4%) have been employed in their current position 6-10 years, while 35 (15.7%) have been employed less than a year. Thirty-one (14.0%) have been employed 4-5 years. Sixteen (7.2%) have held their current position 11-15 years, 12 (5.4%) have been employed 16-20 years, and 20 (9.5%) respondents have been employed more than 20 years.

Figure 2. Respondent Years of Employment in Current Position



Of the 219 respondents indicating their highest level of educational attainment, 69 (31.5%) held a Bachelor’s degree (see Table 2). A third have completed graduate studies less than the Master’s degree, and 48 (21.9%) have attained a Master’s degree. Twenty-six (11.9%) have studied beyond a Master’s degree. Three (1.4%) of the respondents held a Doctoral degree.

Table 2. Respondent’s Highest Level of Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	No.	Percent
Bachelor’s degree	69	31.5
Graduate study but less than Master’s degree	73	33.3
Master’s degree	48	21.9
Graduate study beyond Master’s degree but less than Doctorate	26	11.9
Doctorate	3	1.4
Total	219	100.0

Over two-thirds (69.8%) of the 219 respondents indicating institution location received their Bachelor’s degree from an institution of higher education in Montana, with one additional respondent indicating both North Dakota and Montana (see Table 3).

Table 3. Location of Institution Awarding Respondent Bachelor's Degree

State	No.	Percent
California	3	1.4
Colorado	2	.9
Florida	1	.5
Idaho	1	.5
Indiana	2	.9
Illinois	1	.5
Kansas	1	.5
Louisiana	1	.5
Maine	1	.5
Massachusetts	2	.9
Michigan	2	.9
Minnesota	8	3.6
Missouri	4	1.8
Montana	153	69.8
North Dakota	8	3.6
North Dakota & Montana	1	.5
North Dakota & Oregon	1	.5
New Jersey	2	.9
Ohio	1	.5
Oregon	1	.5
South Dakota	8	3.6
Utah	2	.9
Vermont	2	.9
Washington	6	2.6
Wisconsin	3	1.4
Wyoming	2	.9
Total	219	100.0

School District Demographics

Several questions on the survey asked the workshop participants to describe the school district's student population. Table 4 shows the greatest portion of the 221 respondents (60, or 27.1%) indicated that their districts' enrollment was less than 10 students. Over half (53.3%) of the 221 respondents work in districts that enroll 30 or fewer students. More than two-thirds (76.8%) work in districts that enroll 75 or fewer students.

Table 4. Student Enrollment in Respondent Districts

Students Enrolled	No.	%
Less than 10	60	27.1
11-20	38	17.2
21-30	20	9.0
31-40	9	4.1
41-50	4	1.8
51-75	19	8.6
76-100	31	14.0
101-125	13	5.9
126-150	7	3.2
151-175	5	2.3
176-200	15	6.8
Total	221	100.0

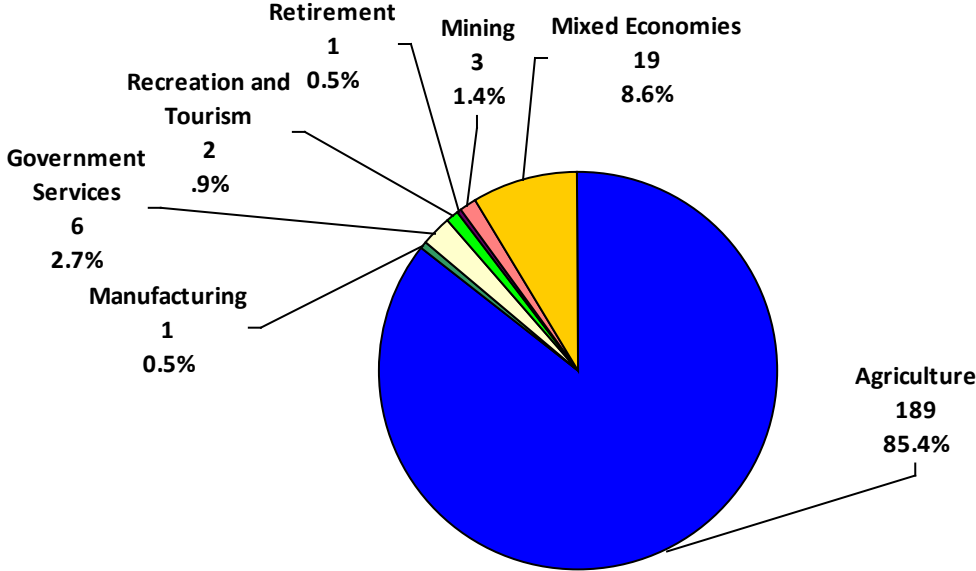
Respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of students in the district (or school if one school in district) eligible for the free and or reduced price lunch program. Table 5 shows 58, or 29.1 percent, of respondents indicated that more than 50 percent of the students in the district were eligible for the free and or reduced lunch program. Forty-eight (24.1%) respondents reported no students eligible for free and or reduced lunch. It is possible, however, that in many of these small frontier schools the respondent does not know if students are eligible for free and or reduced lunch because most of the schools do not offer a lunch program. Many frontier schools do not have a kitchen and lunch facility.

Table 5. Students Eligible for District Free and Reduced Lunch Program

Free and Reduced Price Lunch Students	No.	%
None	48	24.1
1-10%	8	4.0
11-20%	7	3.5
21-30%	22	11.1
31-40%	28	14.1
41-50%	28	14.1
More than 50%	58	29.1
Total	199	100.0

Two hundred twenty-one respondents indicated the type of economic base most prevalent in the rural area served by their school district. Figure 3 shows agriculture is the most prevalent type of economic base in over four-fifths (85.4%) of respondents' districts, followed by "mixed economies" and "government services" and "recreation and tourism." Only one respondent indicated "manufacturing" or "retirement" as the most prevalent type of economic base in the school district.

Figure 3. Most Prevalent Type of Economic Base in School District



Major District Challenges

This section reveals the major challenges (most pressing issues) in the school districts of respondents. First, respondents were asked to indicate the major challenges. Then they were asked to indicate and explain the most important, second most important and third most important challenge. A challenge was defined as a pressing issue at the current time.

Table 6 shows the list of challenges provided on the survey. The challenge noted by the highest percentage of respondents was low student enrollment (57.8%), followed by unrealistic federal regulations (50.2%), inadequate financial resources (48.9%), mixed grade levels of students in classroom (32.9%), and difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s) (32.9%).

District challenges noted by the lowest percentage of respondents were student use of illegal drugs (2.5%), meeting teacher certification requirements (5.5%), student use of alcohol (5.9%), Inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity) (8.9%), inadequate curriculum/course offerings (9.3%), and inadequate number of support staff (9.3%).

Table 6. District Challenges Noted by Respondents

Challenge	No.	%
a. Inadequate financial resources	116	48.9
b. Low student enrollment	137	57.8
c. Low student achievement	33	14.0
d. Unrealistic federal regulations	119	50.2
e. Unrealistic state regulations	66	27.8
f. Needs of special education students	53	22.4
g. Mixed grade levels of students in classroom	78	32.9
h. Inadequate parent involvement	52	21.9
i. Inadequate community support	29	12.2

Table 6. District Challenges Noted by Respondents (continued)

j. Threats of school consolidation or closure	57	24.1
k. Antiquated school facilities	45	19.0
l. Inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity)	21	8.9
m. Difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s)	78	32.9
n. Difficulty retaining teachers	76	32.1
o. Providing teacher professional development opportunities	38	16.0
p. Meeting teacher certification requirements	13	5.5
q. Inadequate curriculum/course offerings	22	9.3
r. Lack of student support services	25	10.5
s. Unmotivated students academically	65	27.4
t. Inappropriate student behavior	27	11.4
u. Student use of illegal drugs	6	2.5
v. Student use of alcohol	14	5.9
w. Inadequate number of support staff	22	9.3
x. Other	13	5.5

Most Important Challenges

After indicating major challenges faced by the school district, the respondent was then asked to indicate the “most important,” “second most important” and “third most important” challenges of the school district. Table 7 shows the challenges indicated by respondents. Based on the percentage of respondents, the top five “Most Important Challenges” were:

- Low student enrollment (n=67, 31.6%)
- Inadequate financial resources (n=60, 28.3%)
- Unrealistic federal expectations (n=20, 9.4%)
- Unmotivated students academically (n=10, 4.7%)
- Mixed grade levels of students in the classroom (n=9, 4.2%)

Based on the percentage of respondents, the top five “Second Most Important Challenges” were:

- Unrealistic federal expectation (n=33, 15.5%)
- Low student enrollment (n=29, 13.6%)
- Inadequate financial resources (n=23, 10.8%)
- Difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s) (n=18, 8.5%)
- Mixed grade levels of students in the classroom (n=16, 7.5%)

Based on the percentage of respondents, the top five “Third Most Important Challenges” were:

- Unrealistic federal expectation (n=30, 14.4%)
- Unmotivated students academically (n=21, 10.0%)
- Unrealistic state expectations (n=20, 9.6%)
- Difficulty retaining teachers (n=16, 7.7%)
- Inadequate financial resources (n=15, 7.2%)

Table 7. Most Important Challenges in Frontier School Districts

Challenge	Most Important Challenge		Second Most Important Challenge		Third Most Important Challenge	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Inadequate financial resources	60	28.3	23	10.8	15	7.2
2. Low student enrollment	67	31.6	29	13.6	8	3.8
3. Low student achievement	4	1.9	5	2.3	5	2.4
4. Unrealistic federal regulations	20	9.4	33	15.5	30	14.4
5. Unrealistic state regulations	3	1.4	12	5.6	20	9.6
6. Needs of special education students	5	2.4	8	3.8	10	4.8
7. Mixed grade levels of students in classroom	9	4.2	16	7.5	15	7.2
8. Inadequate parent involvement	5	2.4	5	2.3	5	2.4
9. Inadequate community support	1	.5	5	2.3	2	1.0
10. Threats of school consolidation or closure	5	2.4	9	4.2	13	6.2
11. Antiquated school facilities	2	.9	9	4.2	9	4.3
12. Inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity)	2	.9	0	0	3	1.4
13. Difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s)	6	2.8	18	8.5	12	5.7
14. Difficulty retaining teachers	6	2.8	15	7.0	16	7.7
15. Providing teacher professional development opportunities	0	0	4	1.9	5	2.4
16. Meeting teacher certification requirements	1	.5	0	0	0	0
17. Inadequate curriculum/course offerings	0	0	4	1.9	2	1.0
18. Lack of student support services	0	0	2	.9	3	1.4
19. Unmotivated students academically	10	4.7	9	4.2	21	10.0
20. Inappropriate student behavior	2	.9	1	.5	8	3.8
21. Student use of illegal drugs	0	0	0	0	0	0
22. Student use of alcohol	0	0	0	0	1	.5
23. Inadequate number of support staff	1	.5	5	2.3	2	1.0
24. Other	3	1.4	1	.5	4	1.9
Total	212	100.0	213	100.0	209	100.0

On the survey the respondent was asked to explain the reason for indicating a challenge as the most important. Sixty-five of the respondents who indicated that “low student enrollment” was the most important challenge provided an explanation (see Table 8). Most statements reflected the issue of how declining or low numbers of students translated into less funding, elimination of staff, and possible school consolidation or closure.

Table 8. Respondent Explanation of “Low Student Enrollment” as Most Important Challenge of School District

We have no incoming students and our enrollment is low already.
We currently have low enrollment with no students coming in.
It is hard on kids to have so few or none in our case opportunities for exposure to other students and learning cooperatively.
Enrollment has dropped over the years.
Will we still be able to fund 2 teachers?
Low student enrollment leads to low funding and threat of consolidation/closure.
Low enrollment could affect schools ability to stay open.
Our enrollment is down significantly this year. We have preschoolers going up, but need to be able to stay open.
Our enrollment has dropped drastically.
Need more students to keep school open.
We don't have many students in the area between generations.
Larger classes allow for necessary student interaction. Allows for better collaboration.
Low student enrollment affects all other areas because of limited school finances.
As students graduate, we only have 1 or so trickling in--so enrollment is dropping.
No students, no school.
Closing school.
Enrollment is low. Major part of financial budget based on student enrollment.
For the first time our school enrollment has dropped below 15-25. Without more students, we face the reality of closing the school.
Our enrollment has been dropping these past few years, and this year we lose our largest number when the 8th grade graduates. We have few children coming up--only one pre-school and no kindergarten. We have to cut back on staff.
We currently have 16 students enrolled, in 3 years at current status we will be down to 12 students. How long can we provide the students the advantage of 2 certified teachers?
The student enrollment is dropping because being in a small community everything is cyclical (steady population).
Consideration of a one or two teacher school.
Our enrollment is down, which affects our budget and staff hiring.
If enrollment becomes too low will good teachers be laid off? Eventually will the school be closed?
Student enrollment numbers = the money (majority) for our budget. No students = no money.
State funding based on ANB.
We have less than 10 students and although we gain a student or two each year, that many are graduating from our school.
Filling the classroom, allowing for greater diversity.
Low enrollment means less money which means we can close.

Table 8. Respondent Explanation of “Low Student Enrollment” as Most Important Challenge of School District (continued)

The student population has fallen a great deal and it does not appear that a wave of people will be moving to this area in the future.
Our low student enrollment has a direct impact on the school’s funding.
The low students enrollment have an effect on our funding.
The low student enrollment has a direct impact on our funding. Without the funds, we will have to decrease the amount of staff and thus lowering our student-to-teacher ratio which will in turn hinder our achievement.
Our enrollment has dropped in half in the past 5 years due to lack of jobs in the area and the remoteness of our town.
As rural Montana continues to decline economically, our school populations continue to dwindle. Although our class sizes are relatively stable right now, we cannot predict what the near future holds.
The most important challenge is the decreasing numbers of students in our school. We are a government and agriculture community and we are loosing numbers in our community and school.
Funding tied to enrollment.
Our enrollment has drastically dropped. I’m very concerned about our school’s future.
We only have 6 students enrolled in my classroom at this time. Ideally the state would like above 10 and I don’t see too much growth in the future.
Would like to see the school remain open.
Low student enrollment will lead to more pressure to consolidation.
Low student enrollment.
Declining enrollment forces the school district to make unpleasant decisions. Even though small class size is what makes small schools successful with student achievement, teachers are faced with challenges when class size becomes very small. Also with small enrollments, financial issues are raised because there are fewer taxpayers in the district. Declining enrollments affects sports activities as more and more schools are co-oping sports teams. We need to travel greater distances to compete in games, and more money needs to be spent for transportation of students to practices. With small class sizes, districts need to make decisions such as combining multi-grades classes with one teacher, and that means letting go of good teachers. Often, it is difficult to recruit good teachers to schools with very small class sizes. The declining enrollments affect many areas of the small schools.
Because without student(s) we would not be open.
There aren’t any kids in the area. Some kids need motivation from other students their age.
Our enrollment is declining and currently at 51 students K-12.
We are currently dropping in enrollment each and every year, if we continue at this rate we will no longer be a viable school.

Table 8. Respondent Explanation of “Low Student Enrollment” as Most Important Challenge of School District (continued)

Low student numbers do not allow for elective classes. In addition extracurricular activities have low participation. Once schools lose their sports programs and extracurricular activities because of lack of participation or low numbers consolidation is not far off and the community will lose its identity.
With declining enrollment, it may be difficult to keep the school operational. This would be devastating for a community to lose it’s school district.
With low enrollment, it is hard to argue why we should not consolidate.
In the 21 years I have been here, we have seen a steady decline of students. There is nothing to keep the best and brightest in the area and out migration is constant.
Low enrollment impacts on going funding, student programs, music, extracurricular, etc., cost per student,
We have a community in which the opportunities for employment are few. Our young people have to leave our community to find jobs that pay enough to support them and their families.
Due to our isolation, we have a small population.
Due to our isolation, we don’t have many people.
Low student enrollment equals affects our financial condition and curriculum offerings/scheduling.
Our school has graduation requirements that limit enrollment in my class, and at the same time I am expected to increase enrollment in my program.
declining enrollment forcing the maximum budget downward
Uncertain economy is stressing the ranches...causing lack of employment or the selling of the land. The young people move to attain employment.
Our current enrollment this year bounces around the 100 level. This means in future years our State funding will be cut once our 3 year average gets to these lower levels. These lower numbers are causing us to combine classrooms and thus lose very good teachers. The lower numbers will also be a reflection on test scores. With smaller classrooms, just one student can cause a grade not to meet the requirements of AYP.
Low student population will affect the future of this school. Very few new or young families with children are moving into the area, in fact, many are moving out of district due to economic issues.
Everything is based on student enrollment. Low numbers mean less money and less ability to get money in the pathetic system that the state uses to allocate money to school districts. The state leadership needs to realize, and soon, that a new system needs to be developed. Numbers are down throughout the state. Costs keep rising. We are expected to do more with less and less, regardless of what government leaders tell us.
Low student enrollment and isolation are the factors that affect many of the other most important issues, that is, recruiting and retaining teachers and having the funds to attract quality teachers. Teachers who have “ties” to the community are not always the teachers which are needed. The ones who are good and have the ties are dependable and reliable.

Table 8. Respondent Explanation of “Low Student Enrollment” as Most Important Challenge of School District (continued)

While our enrollment has not declined at the anticipated rate the last few years, we are declining. Families want to live here, but housing is in short supply, and those houses available are not standard to housing in other areas. This requires us to ask more and more of local taxpayers.

Fifty-seven respondents provided statements to explain why “inadequate financial resources” was the most important challenge of the school district (see Table 9). Statements reflected the impact of financial resources on instructional materials, facilities repair, teacher salaries, special education services, teacher recruitment and retention, linkage of student enrollment to state funding, and ability to offer necessary programs for all students.

Table 9. Respondent Explanation of “Inadequate Financial Resources” as Most Important Challenge in School District

I would like to see more equipment, more field trips, and more resources for our students. Pay for teachers so they can stay would help.
Low priority of teacher retention and low base makes it hard to attract new teachers that are qualified.
Our school (like many rural schools) is constantly struggling financially, which leads to higher teacher turn-over rates (teachers leave for better pay).
The school needs to update/fix physical issues at the school but cannot fund them.
To retain a qualified staff.
Increasing special educational costs, curriculum updates.
Teacher pay is really low but schools can't squeeze anymore pennies for them.
Because of increase in costs associated with day-to-day operations of the school.
Money is based on ANB and land taxes.
Our school lost our title program because of the last Census; the mine that supports our community is closing its doors.
Because we budgeted for far fewer students than we ended up having, we have been forced to really stretch our budget. Therefore I think we are having financial challenges.
Poor local resources and too few students.
Due to lack of student enrollment, our financial situation varies on the enrollment.
We never have enough money to provide the proper education materials.
All schools need more funding to provide adequate resources for students.
Without additional funding in our area, we can't recruit or retain high quality staff.
Can't spend the money where we need to.
Teacher salary is very low.
Falling enrollment and shrinking budgets prevent us from hiring qualified staff because we can't compete with other district wages.
For 2 out of 3 schools money is extremely tight and budgets preclude some programs. With Gifted & Talented cuts at the state level those districts will be struggling to meet needs of all kids.

Table 9. Respondent Explanation of “Inadequate Financial Resources” as Most Important Challenge in School District (continued)

Inadequate financial resources lead to many of the other issues I am concerned about. We are unable to keep up with technology advancements, we have high teacher turnover (they move on to better pay). We can’t afford specialists (music, phy. ed., art, etc.) so the kids are receiving adequate, but less than top-notch education in those areas.
Low enrollment ties in with the finances and the finances prevent the district from hiring highly qualified teachers
The one time funding that school districts have received doesn’t benefit the school in that it’s not continued funding that can actually be counted on from year to year.
Our district is located in an area with virtually no tax base. A mill is worth approximately \$450. Our physical plant is almost 100 years old (1919) It is a struggle to generate enough money to maintain the old buildings and provide quality equipment for students. It’s a challenge to offer competitive teacher salaries.
The cost of providing an appropriate free and public education to students continues to get considerably more expensive while the funding from the state and federal governments increases slightly. We go to local taxpayers to help offset these rising costs, but the local burden has become so great that community support is starting to waver and we will be looking at major cuts over the next few years.
Funding is too low to provide higher wages for teacher, which flows over to second most important challenge.
Financial short falls make it difficult to fund all necessary improvements, offer competitive salaries, buy new text books, stay current with technology, etc.
With the current funding, we are unable to offer competitive salaries.
Funding from State is inadequate as teacher salary does not compare and retention is difficult. The facility needs updating and funds are not available.
Inadequate funding strains the operating budget and keeps teacher’s salary low.
Funding is needed to retain teachers, provide quality special ed. needs, and upgrade the school building.
Funding needed to raise teacher salary and improve or replace facility.
Retention of teacher due to low salary and working conditions.
When financial resources are at a bare minimum, we cannot provide the students with the learning environment they deserve.
Costs have increased but our dollars have not. Teachers have significant longevity so most of the staff is placed at the upper end of the salary schedule.
The financial pressure we are under can only be alleviated by reducing staff.
The lack of financial support from our state affects every area of our district.
Better pay and textbooks would make my job better.
Money is needed to run the school. An increase in wages is needed to help retain staff.
In order to meet AYP we just don’t have the personnel to work with the students. We share staff between K-8 and 9-12 grades. To hire personnel we need funding.
Budgets are usually the main concern especially in a small rural community. Pay for teachers is not competitive with other states.

Table 9. Respondent Explanation of “Inadequate Financial Resources” as Most Important Challenge in School District (continued)

Our school doesn't have the funding to buy educational resources for our students, such as a science (textbook) series.
Montana schools are almost criminally underfunded, unconstitutional.
Seem to have plenty of money for administrators but nothing for teacher raises, new text books etc.
Difficulty in getting new teachers.
Our budget is based on student enrollment and whether we have one student or 20 students the school facilities must be maintained. For example, the school must be heated and must have electricity. Therefore, more and more of the budget is being used for those things and less and less for textbooks and other supplies. Also, the budget has been so small in the last 5 to 7 years and the teacher's salary has not been increased in that time. I have taught here for 23 years and have a salary less than the average starting salary for Montana.
Keeping the doors open as enrollment declines and then rises is a big challenge. We want to pay the teacher a decent salary, but it is increasingly difficult to do that.
We are barely able to keep the doors open with the present funding. Our teachers are underpaid and overworked, and there is nothing we can do to increase funding.
Montana's surplus has evaporated. We know there may be a special legislative session. School funding could be back on the chopping block. Prospects look grim for future school funding in our state.
It seems we are required to do more and more with less and less and the trend continues downward.
If we were able to have more flexibility in how we spend money and save money, our situation would be better, but we are forced to spend money in "pots" that don't always meet our needs. Additionally, rural schools cannot keep pace with the salaries offered in larger schools, so our salaries and benefits often lag behind.
Funding is always an issue. Lower enrollment and more taxing of the local taxpayers is hurting us badly. The small community cannot continue to fund all of the entities that it needs to fund. Each mill levy is a huge burden.
Without adequate finances to retain our teachers, we cannot meet the state requirements for accreditation.
With increasing utility and service costs, we lack funds to pay teachers the same as the larger districts and provide them with benefits, and the lack of state funding, inadequate funding, is indeed number one.
Because of lack of funding we are unable to increase our curriculum offerings and programs. It is also difficult to attract quality applicants for open teaching positions because we are unable to increase our budgets to allow us to pay a competitive wage. Most of the increase in funding the past few years has come with mandates of how it must be spent. Local authority and decision making has been taken out of the equation with school funding.
School funding is always a high priority. We must have adequate dollars in order to maintain a quality rural school with top-notch teachers.
There is so much uncertainty of how schools will be funded for the long-term.

Nineteen respondents provided statements to explain why “unrealistic federal expectations” was the most important challenge of the school district (see Table 10). Statements reflected unrealistic expectations of federal mandates because of small student enrollments, limited time for teacher to complete paperwork, an overemphasis on testing as sole measure of student performance, inadequate federal funding to support implementing requirements of regulations, and a general preference for local control of school decision making.

Table 10. Respondent Explanation of “Unrealistic Federal Expectations” as Most Important Challenge in School District

I feel that a lot of the national (federal) regulations do not fit with our rural schools.
Due to the nature of two room schools the federal regulations fall on the teachers whose time is already limited. These “duties” mandated by regulations limit the time you have to spend with students.
It is a bit ridiculous that our school meet the requirements of NCLB. Lucky we have FERPA.
The paperwork is so time consuming. It takes hours away from teaching each month.
Unrealistic emphasis on a one-time test.
Many mandates are aimed at grades based on having many students.
Federal requirements are not specifically applicable to my student population from year to year.
The feds are clueless about what it takes to make good learning happen in schools. Rural schools are unique in that we have excellent visibility, control, and ability to make change because of our small size. Our kids graduate, get jobs, stay out of prison, meet NCLB, and participate in extracurricular activities. Our teachers get paid squat, I can’t find housing. They coach, are advisors, take tickets at events, and cover for each other when there are absences. Often they teach numerous subjects and are highly qualified to do so. They are well on their way to burn out, but because of the kids, they keep giving it their all. We don’t teach to the test and yet our students do well. The trend toward national testing and national evaluations and national standards is NUTS! The rural student in Northeastern Montana does not need to know the same things as the student growing up in urban Seattle. If the student chooses to expand their knowledge, they have ample opportunities to pursue it after high school. Education needs to be turned back to local control with state oversight.
The Federal Education department has no clue concerning small schools. Their regulations are suited to large schools with many problems. They don’t understand that small schools have a built in accountability to parents and community...related siblings in the same room. Usually the school is surrounded by relatives of the students...and they keep a close eye on the teachers, students and building.
Federal regulations ask schools to test their students to see if they are meeting “AYP.” I teach in a country school that has one student representing grades k, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th. I would like to see a better way to show smaller schools are meeting AYP.

Table 10. Respondent Explanation of “Unrealistic Federal Expectations” as Most Important Challenge in School District (continued)

The paper work is staggering and the government has no idea how a small school functions. For example, the families are mostly intact and deeply involved in all areas of their child’s development and discipline. The parents are mostly well educated and very knowledgeable of the way the world works (outside of government). The students are usually related and have been together since birth. There is a deep pride in going to a small school, especially if their grandparents went there also. The community’s social life often revolves around the school and its activities...debates, spelling bees, holiday parties, fund raising events, etc. Small schools have a natural disciplining machine ...everybody knows almost everything that happens at school. There is very little “bad stuff” going on.
When you have students that are dealing with so many disruptions in the home, it is difficult to engage and extend the students’ education. The expectations at the highest level expect all children to have the same exposure to things across the nation.
We have children come to school with a variety of issues and challenges and NCLB has put too much emphasis on academic achievement while the social and emotional issues have been ignored.
The many forms required of the teacher and administrator seems to increase every year.
Many demands of the teacher to complete tons of paper work. This takes me away from the many tasks and duties as a teacher in a multi-grade level rural school.
No Child Left Behind is a program that does not meet the needs of the students in our small, rural school. Our learners are unique and do not fit the NCLB model. Over 30% of our students qualify medically as emotionally disturbed and over 20% qualify for special education. It is virtually impossible for many of these students to live up to the NCLB standards.
The paperwork is very time consuming leaving very little time to do the regular day to day duties. I have 3 titles at my school and keeping up with the paperwork, but something has to give.
The federal mandates are not supported financially.
Making all students proficient is a lofty goal.

Ten respondents provided statements to explain why “unmotivated students academically” was the most important challenge of the school district (see Table 11). Statements reflected the inability of students to see relevance in what they were learning, student unwillingness to extend enough effort to succeed academically, and/or a general lack of student responsibility and motivation.

Table 11. Respondent Explanation of “Unmotivated Students Academically” as Most Important Challenge in School District

The kids just don’t care. It’s hard to teach students with that attitude.
The students’ lack of desire to learn hinders the entire process. They shut themselves down.
Many older students don’t care about doing well. Right now they are just concerned about passing.
Students seem less willing to work and are less motivated to excel than former students.

Table 11. Respondent Explanation of “Unmotivated Students Academically” as Most Important Challenge in School District (continued)

One unmotivated student in a 1-teacher school with few students can truly drag down the whole student population.
Getting students motivated to read, learn, improve themselves, and prepare for a successful future is difficult. Students do not see any relevancy to learning.
Education does not seem to be a priority. The kids don’t want to succeed enough to go the extra mile and take on the responsibility of learning.
This is my most pressing issue because we don’t have enough space, our buildings are sinking, and the outlook of the students and community is our school is falling apart and has been for years.
It is difficult to make progress toward AYP if students do not want to learn. Knowledge just is not the “cool” thing to do among our students.
Many students are only doing enough to pass the class, and sometimes not even that. They do not see the effect their high school education has on their future, college or otherwise.

Nine respondents provided statements to explain why “mixed grade levels of students in classroom” was the most important challenge of the school district (see Table 12). Generally, statements reflected how the multi-grade classroom situation hindered the teacher regarding time needed to work with individual students in a specific grade to meet expected learning standards.

Table 12. Respondent Explanation of “Mixed Grade Levels of Students in Classroom” as Most Important Challenge in School District

Multi grades with inadequate time to work with each group.
Meeting all the standards for each grade level in each lesson is difficult.
Between 1 and 2 students per grade and mostly female student population.
Difficult at times to keep all age groups occupied at same time.
One room school with 8 grades, 3 students maximum per grade.
Time restrictions for planning and presenting lessons to multi grades.
I am the Agricultural Education Instructor and this curriculum, just as any is structured using building knowledge and education. For me, mixed classes make it very difficult to teach to the specific grade level and tailor the curriculum as it should be for my national standards.
When there are so many mixed ages in one class, it is difficult to meet the needs of each student--from those at the top of the class to those who are struggling.
Rural school with grades K-2 in one class with an aide and grades 3-6 with an aide. Making sure each student has enough one on one involvement with teacher.

Sustainability Practices

Respondents were asked to indicate if selected practices have contributed to school sustainability in the district. These practices were grouped into four categories: (1) general operations, (2) staffing, (3) fiscal, and (4) distance learning technology.

General Operations Practices

Table 13 shows the number and percentage of respondents who indicated that General Operations Practices have contributed to school sustainability in districts. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (67.9%) reported that operating multi-grade classrooms has contributed to school sustainability in the district. Ninety-nine (41.8%) indicated that operating school facilities to serve community functions has contributed. Slightly more than one in ten (11.9%) reported that operating on a 4-day schedule has contributed to school sustainability.

Table 13. General Operations Practices Contributing to School Sustainability

General Operations Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Operated a 4-day per week school schedule	28	11.9	208	88.1	236	100
b. Operated mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms	161	67.9	76	32.1	237	100.0
c. Operated school facilities to also serve community functions	99	41.8	138	58.2	237	100.0
d. Other	23*	10.4	199	89.6	222	100

Fourteen respondents provided a statement to explain their choice of “Other” regarding general operations practices that have contributed to school sustainability in the district. Statements of respondents were:

1. Teachers have numerous endorsements so I am able to manipulate the schedule easier than some schools.
2. One person doing several responsibilities (teacher/supervising teacher, etc.).
3. Operate a strong Adult Education program. The school is technology rich, via grants and general funds, and great school pride.
4. Good teachers.
5. Operated a 5-day per week school schedule for half the year.
6. Proactive administration that has fought to keep the doors open.
7. Volunteer staff.
8. Teacher lives in a small attached efficiency apartment connected to the school.
9. Doing without some of everything.
10. Operate 4-day school week.
11. Operate a shortened school year schedule but not as far as a 4-day week schedule.
12. Operate a modified 4-day per week school schedule. We have tried to maintain a quality program within the funds allotted.
13. Housing 7th and 8th grade students in the high school and having secondary teachers teach them.
14. Have instituted a 160 calendar. We go five days a week, but begin two weeks later in the fall and dismiss two weeks earlier in the spring. [Researchers’ note: Montana requires a set number of hours to be met, not days.]

Staffing Practices

Table 14 shows the staffing practices that have contributed to school sustainability in districts. “Made available special in-service opportunities” was selected by the highest percentage of respondents (45.1%). “Created partnerships with other districts” (31.2%) received the second highest percentage of respondents (32%),

followed by “Employed teacher(s) with multiple endorsements” (30.9%), “Passed local levy” (30.4%) and “Promoted reputation of school (30.4%). Interestingly, only nine of the respondents selected the practice “Recruited teachers more aggressively from selected colleges” and only two respondents indicated “Offered teacher induction program.” In small schools it is difficult to have a teacher induction program when the new teacher is the only education professional in the school.

Table 14. Staffing Practices Contributing to School Sustainability

Staffing Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Employed teacher(s) with multiple endorsements	73	30.9	163	69.1	236	100.0
b. Used distance learning technology to offer teacher professional development opportunities	48	20.3	189	79.7	237	100.0
c. Obtained federal or state grants to fund key personnel	64	27.0	173	73.0	237	100.0
d. Created partnerships with other districts	74	31.2	163	38.8	237	100.0
e. Increased use of community volunteers for non-teaching duties	33	13.9	204	86.1	237	100.0
f. Recruited teachers more aggressively from selected colleges	9	3.8	228	96.2	237	100.0
g. Passed local levy	72	30.4	165	69.6	237	100.0
h. Received special state funding	31	13.1	206	86.9	237	100.0
i. Offered career incentives	23	9.7	214	90.3	237	100.0
j. Served as student teacher site	26	11.0	211	89.0	237	100.0
k. Made available special in-service opportunities	107	45.1	130	54.9	237	100.0
l. Made available special in-service opportunities	51	21.5	186	78.5	237	100.0
m. Promoted reputation of school	72	30.4	165	69.6	237	100.0
n. Collaborated with higher education institution	15	6.3	222	93.7	237	100.0
o. Offered teacher induction program	2	.8	235	99.2	237	100.0
p. Offered Future Teachers Club	0	0.0	237	0	237	100.0
q. Other	11	4.6	226	95.4	237	100.0

Of the 11 respondents that indicated “Other,” eight provided a statement of explanation, as follows:

1. Professional development opportunities.
2. Athletic COOP.
3. Indian Education funds.
4. No teacher incentive practices or inducements.

5. Provide mentoring of new staff and substantial efforts in place to foster harmony among staff, board, community, and students.
6. School paying for professional development since our school doesn't have a pay scale.
7. Started attending career fairs and actively pursuing recruits at the first hint of a vacancy.
8. We have a very veteran staff at present. In the near future (two to three years) these staff members will be retiring and then we will have a totally different type of school district.

Fiscal Practices

Table 15 shows fiscal practices that have contributed to school sustainability in districts. “Sought bids and comparison pricing for all purchases” and “Formed consortium of school districts to leverage resources” were equally indicated by the highest percentage of respondents (39.2%). “Cooperated with other districts for specialized personnel” was indicated by the next highest percentage of respondents (38.8%) as contributing to school sustainability in their districts, followed by “Increased student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten)” (37.1%) and “Hired teachers on low end of district pay scale” (36.7%).

Table 15. Fiscal Practices Contributing to School Sustainability

Fiscal Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Formed consortium of school districts to leverage resources	93	39.2	144	60.8	237	100.0
b. Paid all bills promptly where discounts are involved	82	34.6	155	65.4	237	100.0
c. Sought bids and comparison pricing for all purchases	93	39.2	143	60.6	237	100.0
d. Was aggressive in energy conservation measures	68	28.7	169	71.3	237	100.0
e. Cooperated with other districts for specialized personnel	92	38.8	145	61.2	237	100.0
f. Pooled efforts in insurance and investment programs	39	16.5	198	83.5	237	100.0
g. Increased student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten)	88	37.1	149	62.9	237	100.0
h. Reduced use of substitutes on secondary school level	14	5.9	223	94.1	237	100.0
i. Went for bond issues until one passes	5	2.1	232	97.9	237	100.0
j. Won competitive state grant funds	21	8.9	216	91.1	237	100.0
k. Won competitive federal grant funds	19	8.0	218	92.0	237	100.0
l. Hired teachers on low end of district pay scale	87	36.7	150	63.3	237	100.0
m. Provided no health insurance coverage	40	16.9	197	83.1	237	100.0
n. Other	4	.1.7	223	98.3	237	100.0

Statements of the four respondents indicating “other” were:

1. Athletic Coop.
2. Modest salary and hourly rates compared to nation but adequate to secure good staff that wish to live and work in this part of country, and a sense of team pride and commitment.
3. Impact Aid funds.
4. The district has passed local mill levies for improved school operations.

Distance Learning Technology Practices

Table 16 shows the distance learning technology practices that have contributed to school sustainability in districts. “Delivered professional development opportunities for teachers” was selected by the highest percentage of respondents (40.9%). “Provided enrichment experiences for students” (38.0%) was indicated by the second highest percentage of respondents. A much lower percentage of respondents indicated “Provided citizens access to Internet” (16.9%), “Offered courses to meet state-mandated curriculum requirements” (16.5%), “Offered advanced placement courses for college bound students” (12.7%), “Offered school board training (12.7%), and “Delivered professional development opportunities for administrators” (11.4%). Because the vast majority of the respondents in the survey worked in elementary school districts, a low selection of the practices particularly relevant to high schools should be expected.

Table 16. Distance Learning Technology Contributing to School Sustainability

Distance Learning Technology Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Provided enrichment experiences for students	90	38.0	147	62.0	237	100.0
b. Delivered professional development opportunities for teachers	97	40.9	140	59.1	237	100.0
c. Offered elective course(s) for which certified teacher is not available	25	10.5	212	89.5	237	100.0
d. Offered advanced placement courses for “college bound” students	30	12.7	207	87.3	237	100.0
e. Offered courses to meet state-mandated curriculum requirements	39	16.5	198	83.5	237	100.0
f. Delivered professional development opportunities for administrators	27	11.4	210	88.6	237	100.0
g. Provided classes for the community	25	10.5	212	89.5	237	100.0
h. Offered dual credit (college/high school credit)	14	5.9	223	94.1	237	100.0
i. Offered school board training	30	12.7	207	87.3	237	100.0
j. Provided citizens access to Internet	40	16.9	197	83.1	237	100.0
k. Other	7	3.0	230	97.0	237	100.0

Seven respondents provided an explanation for indicating “other,” as follows:

1. We communicate with other classrooms in our county but don’t really have any “distance Learning” courses.
2. School library also serves as community library, open after school and evenings during week and some Saturdays.
3. The Hutterites do not have distance learning.
4. Has enabled my students to go outside their textbooks to add to their enrichment of a particular subject.
5. Adult education.
6. At the present, we have not used distance learning much. The technology we had for receiving distant learning classes and sending distant learning classes is now out-dated. The funds for getting a new system are not attainable at the present time.
7. This district has not deemed it necessary to participate in district learning.

Sustainability Reasons

The survey asked respondents to indicate the importance of eight selected reasons as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district. The eight reasons included:

1. Importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth.
2. Importance of school to the community in meeting community development functions or needs (e.g., public forums, family reunions, cooperative extension service meetings).
3. Travel distance is too far for students to attend nearest out-of-district school.
4. Geography and road conditions are safer to travel in winter than nearest out-of-district school..
5. Operating expenditures basically same as schools in other neighboring districts.
6. Lack of opposition in the district to closing the school(s).
7. Lack of external pressure (outside of district) to close the school(s).
8. Key politicians representing the rural area strongly support the school(s).

Figure 4 shows almost half (47.9%) of respondents indicated “Very Important,” with an additional fifth (22.1%) indicating “Extremely Important” regarding the reason *importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth*. Another fifth (20.0%) of the respondents indicated the reason was “Important.”

Figure 4. Educate Children and/or Youth of Community

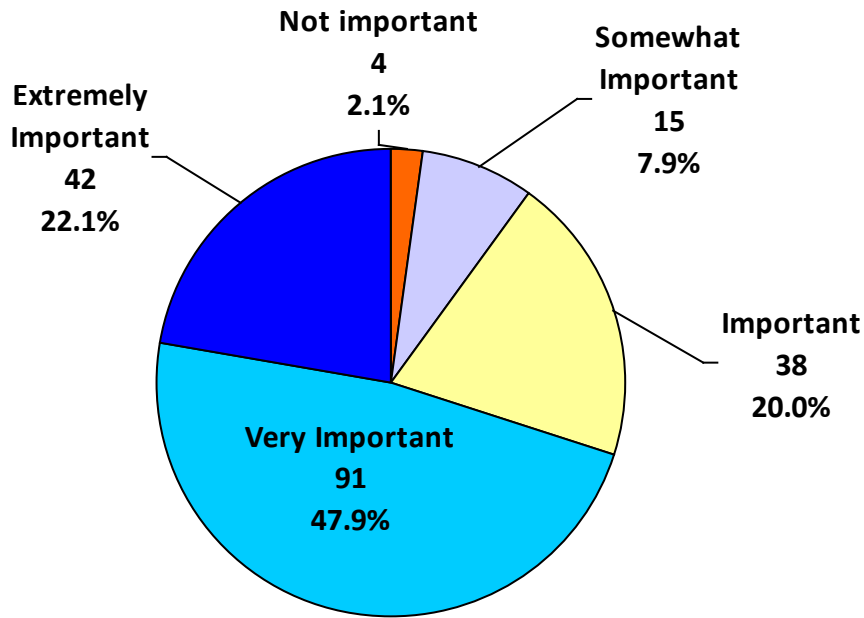


Figure 5 shows slightly less than one-third (30.5%) of respondents indicated “Very Important” and “Extremely Important” regarding the reason *importance of school to the community in meeting community development functions or needs* (e.g., public forums, family reunions, cooperative extension service meetings). An additional half of the respondents indicated “Somewhat Important (23.7%) or “Important (28.9%).

Figure 5. Meet Community Development Functions or Needs

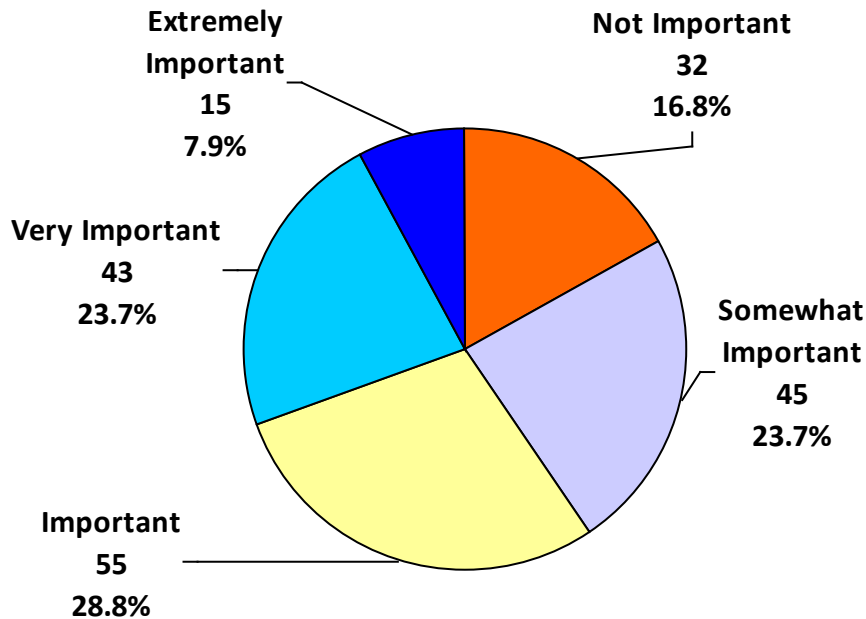


Figure 6 reveals one-third of respondents indicated “Travel distance is too far for students to attend nearest out-of-district school” as “Very Important” or “Extremely Important.” Slightly more than one-third (36.5%) indicated “Somewhat Important” and “Important.” Less than one-third (30.2%) indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 6. Travel Distance Too Far to School Out of District

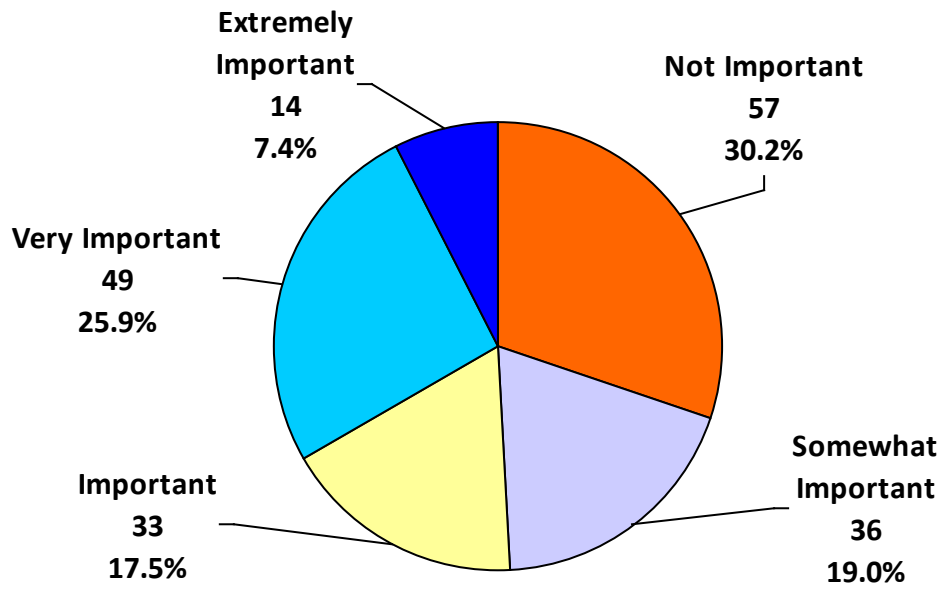
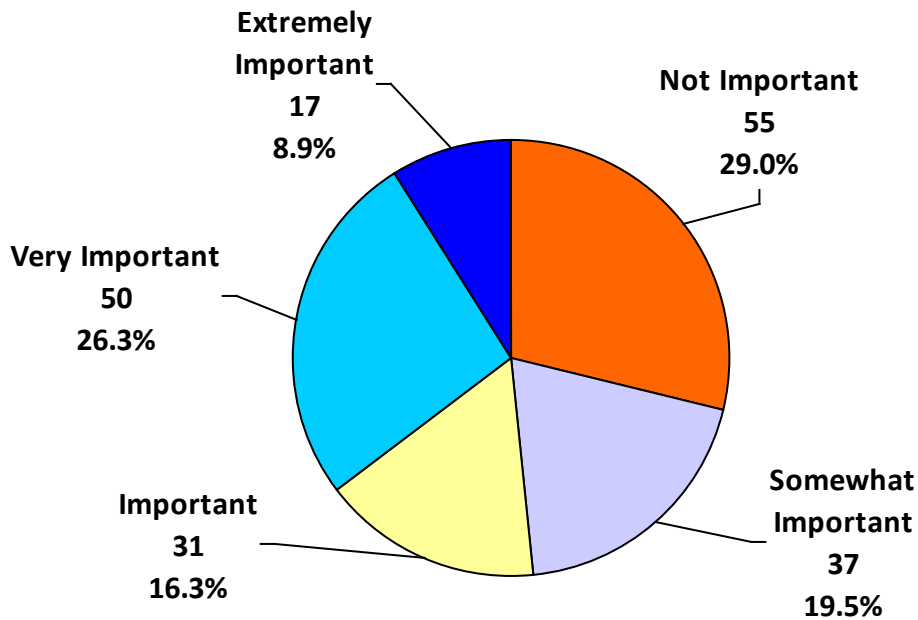


Figure 7 shows more than one-third (35.2%) of respondents indicated “Geography and road conditions are safer to travel in winter than nearest out-of-district school” as “Very Important” and “Extremely Important.” Another third (35.8%) of respondents indicated “Somewhat Important” and “Important.” Less than one-third (28.9%) indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 7. Geography and Road Conditions Safer



More than six in ten respondents (61.6%) indicated “Operating expenditures basically same as schools in other neighboring districts” as “Somewhat Important” and “Important” (see Figure 8). One-fifth (20.7%) indicated “Very Important” and “Extremely Important.” Approximately 18 percent indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 8. School Operating Expenditures Basically Same as Neighboring Districts

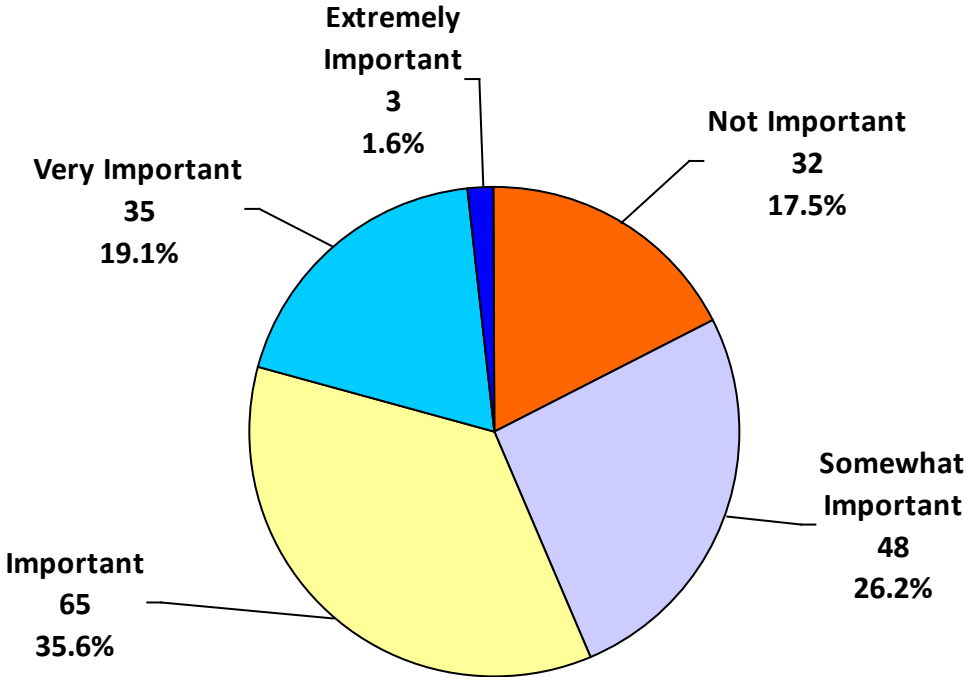
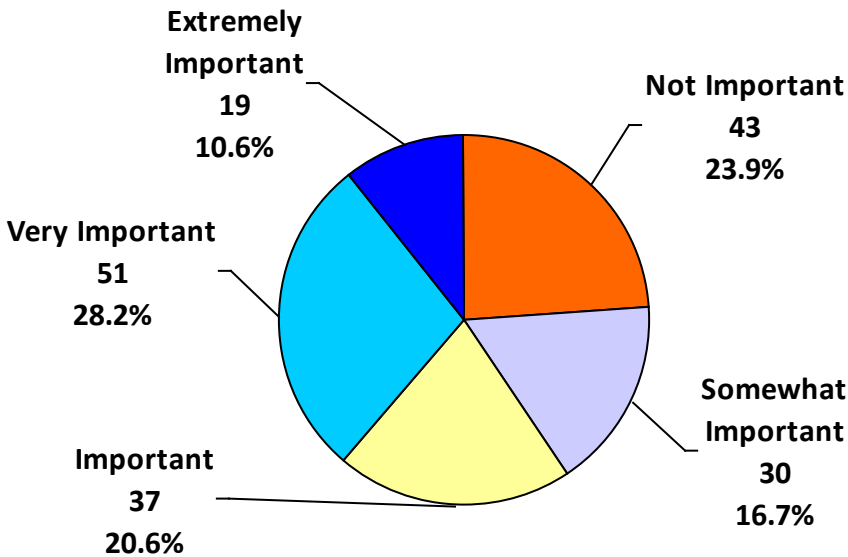


Figure 9 shows almost four in ten of respondents (38.9%) indicated the reason “Lack of opposition in the district to closing the school(s)” was “Very Important” and “Extremely Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district. Approximately one-fourth (23.9%) indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 9. Lack of Opposition in the District to Closing School



Slightly more than one-third (33.9%) of respondents indicated the reason “Lack of external pressure (outside of district) to close the school(s)” was “Very Important” and “Extremely Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district (see Figure 10). Slightly more than one-fifth (22.8%) indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 10. Lack of External Pressure (Outside of District) to Close School

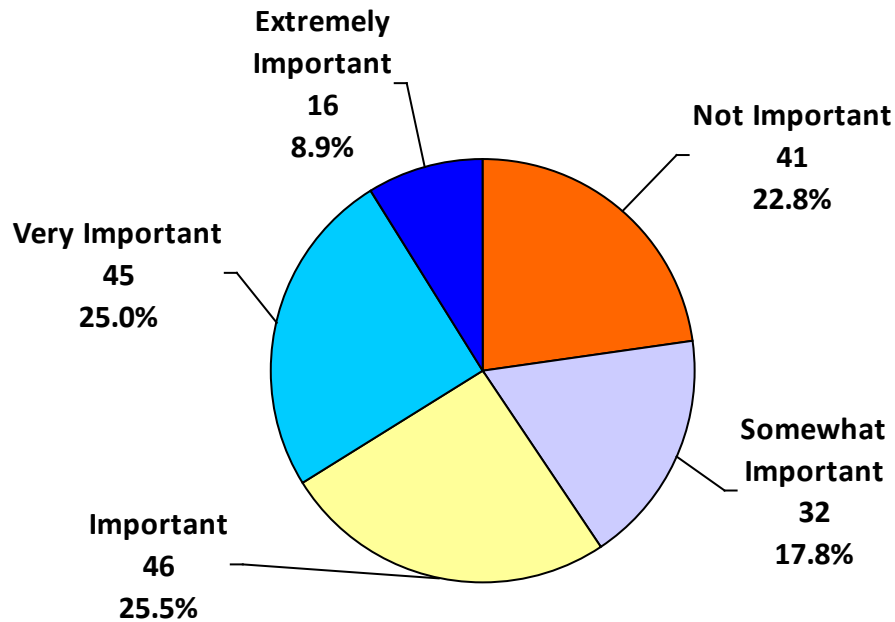


Figure 11 shows slightly more than one-fourth (27.4%) of 10 respondents indicated the reason “Key politicians representing the rural area strongly support the school(s)” was “Very Important” and “Extremely Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district. Almost half (46.7%) indicated “Somewhat Important” and “Important.” One-fourth (25.8%) indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 11. Key Politicians in Area Strongly Support the School

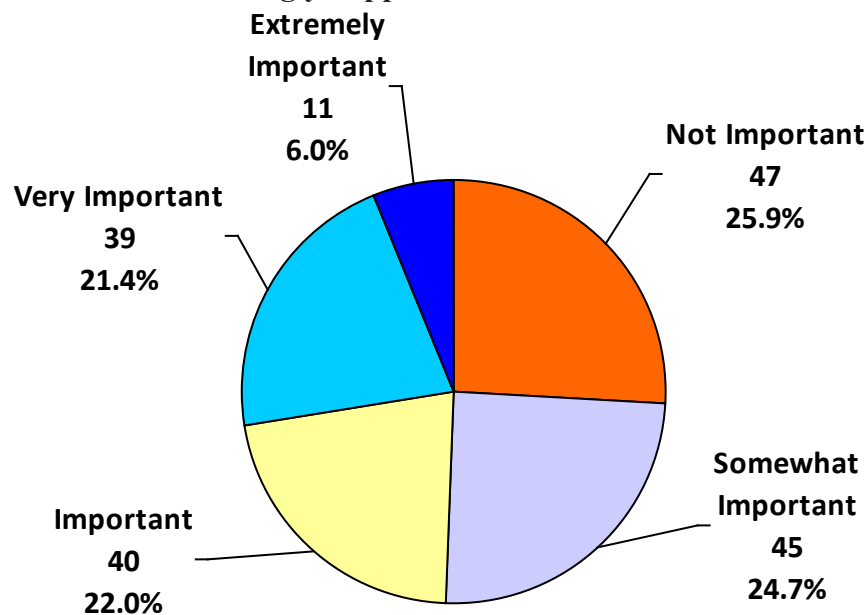


Table 17 reveals 19 of the respondents also provided a statement and rating to explain an “other” reason as an important consideration in sustaining the small rural public school. The rating scale was 1= Not Important, 2=Somewhat Important, 3= Important, 4= Very Important, and 5= Extremely Important.

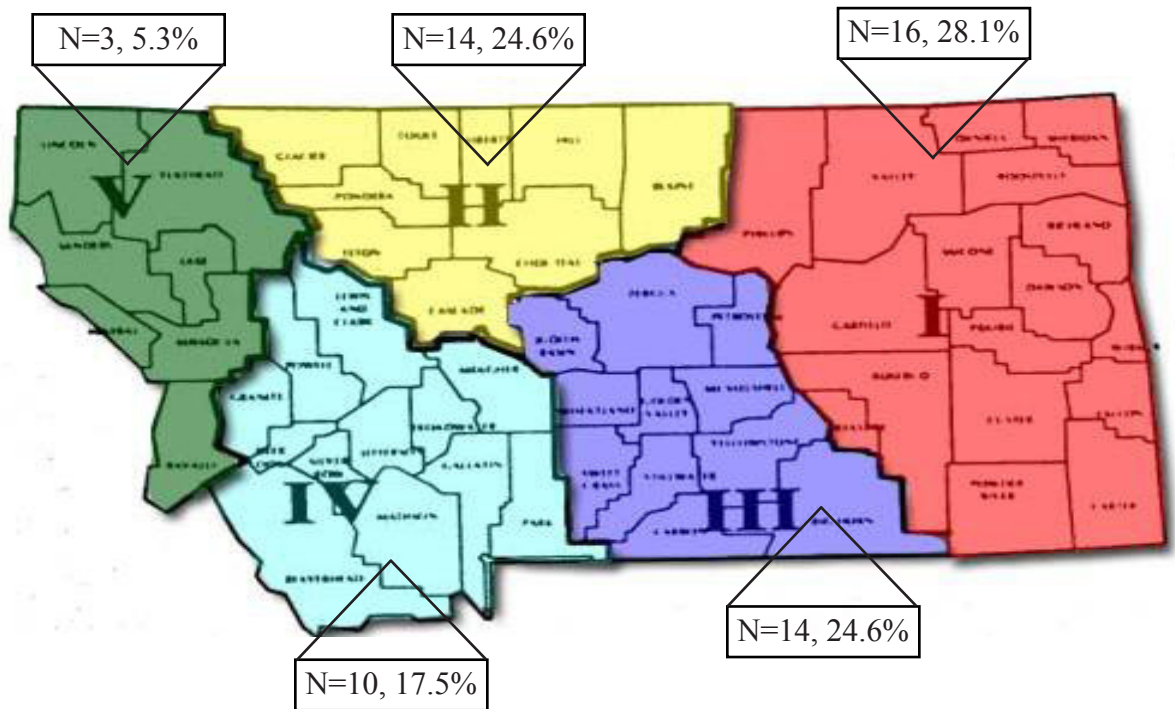
Table 17. Other Reasons for Sustaining School

Reason	Rating
1. Class sizes and the one-on-one instruction.	4
2. High academic and discipline standards.	4
3. Increasing taxes are a worry.	4
4. Isolation and distance for students to travel to a neighboring district.	4
5. Low taxes for people in district.	5
6. Maintenance of identity for the community.	3
7. Multiple job titles.	3
8. School is the hub of the community.	4
9. Promotion of maintaining family, school, and economic traditions and cultures that are rooted in the school community.	4
10. Reaching the most students with the best education possible.	3
11. School is hub of community.	4
12. Support of parents.	4
13. The community is very supportive of the school.	4
14. The fact that test scores are high shows that we provided an excellent educational opportunity.	4
15. The quality of education and amount of community support the school and students receive.	4
16. There is no interest in the school.	1
17. School is kept open for Hutterite Colony.	2
18. Tremendous sense of school/community pride. We will host the District’s 100th Centennial celebration this summer. Annual All Class reunion in July is supported by over 200 participants each year.	4
19. Trouble recruiting substitutes.	1

Results: School Board Chair Survey

The chairs of 57 school boards (40%) completed the paper and pencil survey. Figure 12 shows the response of school board chairs by the five Montana regional service areas. Board chair respondents were fairly equally distributed among service regions I, II and III. The fewest respondents were from Region V. This was consistent with the target population.

Figure 12. Response by Montana Regional Service Area



Board Chair Characteristics

Several figures reveal characteristics of board chairs that completed the survey. Figure 13 shows the response by type of district. Of the 57 respondents, almost four in five served as board chair for a K-8 school district.

Figure 13. Board Chair Response by Type of District

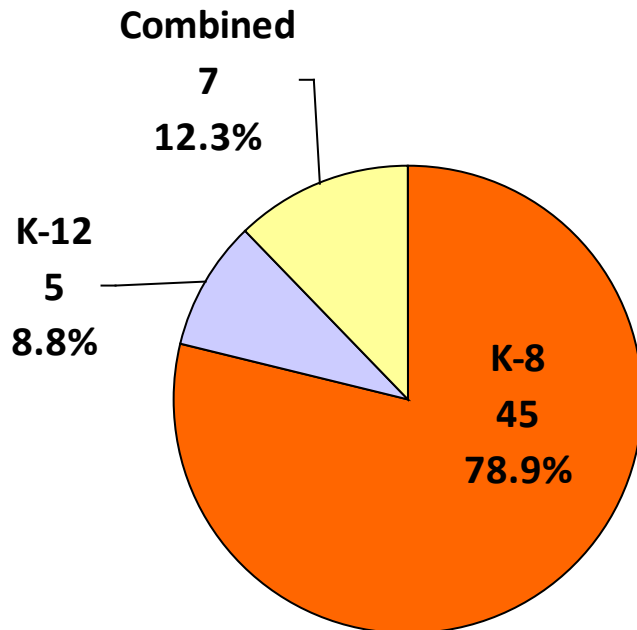


Figure 14 shows the number of years a board chair had been a member of the school board. Of the 52 responding, most board chairs had served 4-7 years (30.8%) or 8-10 years (28.8%) on the school board. Two board chairs had served on the board for 21 or more years.

Figure 14. Board Chair Years of Service on School Board

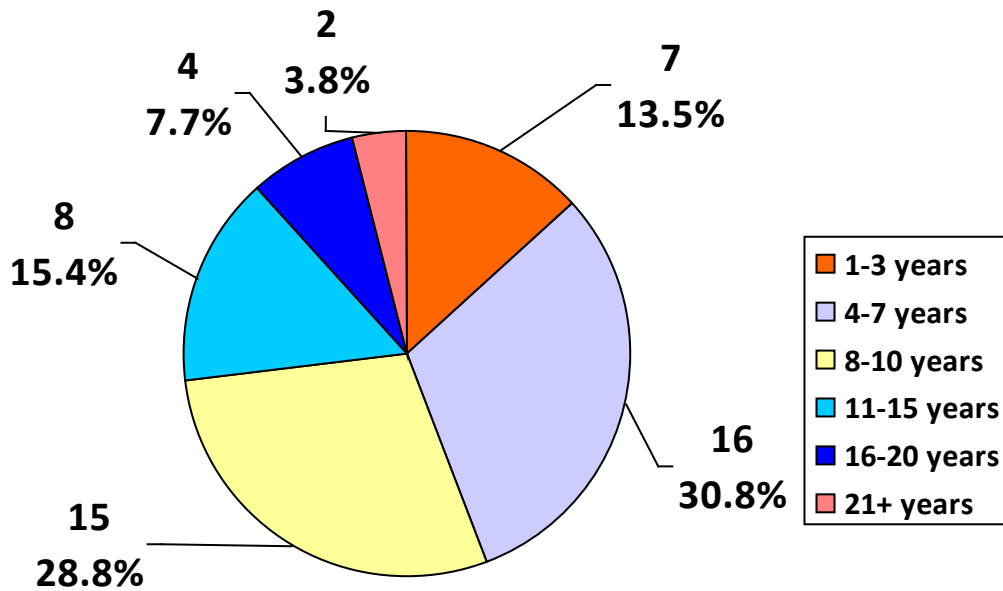
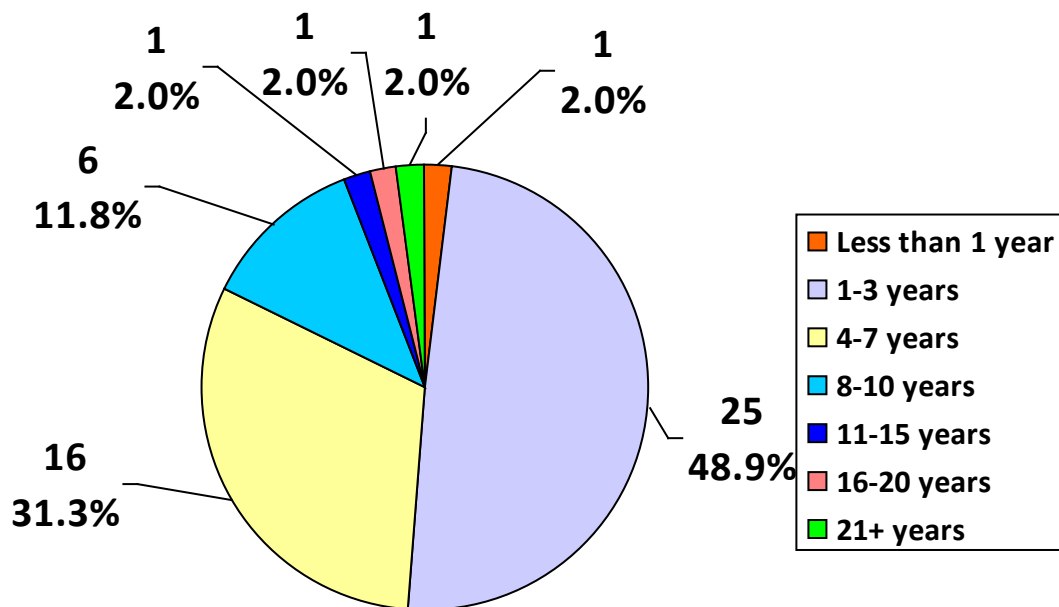


Figure 15 shows the number of years the respondent had served as chair of the school board. Of the 51 respondents, almost half (48.9%) has served 1-3 years as board chair. Another third (31.3%) of the board chairs has served 4-7 years as chair of the school board.

Figure 15. Years as Chair of School Board



District Challenges

Respondents were asked to indicate the three greatest challenges (most pressing issues) in the school district at the current time by noting the greatest challenge, the second greatest challenge, and the third greatest challenge. Table 18 reveals “low student enrollment” was noted as the greatest challenge by the highest percentage of respondents (n=20, 35.1%), followed by “inadequate financial resources” (n=14, 24.6%), and “unrealistic federal regulations” (n=9, 15.8%). These same three challenges were also noted by the highest percentage of the 55 board chairs who indicated the second greatest challenge, each noted by 12.7% of respondents. A slightly lower percentage of board chairs noted “unrealistic state regulations” (10.9%) and “threats of school consolidation or closure” (10.5%) as the second greatest challenge. Of the 51 board chairs who indicated a third greatest challenge, “unrealistic federal regulations” and “threats of school consolidation or closure” were noted equally by the highest percentage of board chairs (21.6%).

Table 18. Greatest, Second Greatest and Third Greatest Challenges Noted by Board Chairs

District Challenge	Greatest Challenge		Second Greatest Challenge		Third Greatest Challenge	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Inadequate financial resources	14	24.6	7	12.7	1	2.0
2. Low student enrollment	20	35.1	7	12.7	2	3.9
3. Low student achievement			1	1.8	2	3.9
4. Unrealistic federal regulations	9	15.8	7	12.7	11	21.6
5. Unrealistic state regulations	3	5.3	6	10.9	7	13.7
6. Needs of special education students			5	9.1	2	3.9
7. Mixed grade levels of students in Classroom			2	3.6	1	2.0
8. Inadequate parent involvement	1	1.8				
9. Threats of school consolidation or Closure	1	1.8	6	10.5	11	21.6
10. Antiquated school facilities	1	1.8	2	3.5	1	2.0
11. Inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity)	1	1.8	2	3.5	2	3.9
12. Difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s)	4	7.0	3	5.3	4	7.8
13. Difficulty retaining teachers	1	1.8	4	7.0	2	3.9
14. Providing teacher professional development opportunities	0	0	1	1.8	1	2.0
15. Meeting teacher certification Requirements	0	0	0	0	1	2.0
16. Inadequate curriculum/course offerings	1	1.8	0	0	0	0
17. Lack of student support services	0	0	0	0	0	0
18. Unmotivated students academically	1	1.8	1	1.8	1	2.0
19. Inappropriate student behavior	0	0	1	1.8	0	0
20. Other	0	0	0	0	2	3.9
Total	57	100.0	55	100.0	51	100.0

Greatest Challenge Reasons

The board chair was also asked to briefly explain why the “greatest challenge” noted was an issue in the school district at the current time. Table 19 reveals the statements provided by each board chair on the survey.

Table 19. Explanation of Greatest District Challenge by Board Chair

Challenge: Inadequate financial resources
● Because it takes funding to hire a good teacher.
● Not enough finances to have aides, etc.
● Our staff has been stable for a while now so the salaries are increasing to a level that is difficult for us to maintain.
● Although we receive stimulus funds they are basically one time only funds and don't help to maintain programs. What is needed is continuing funds that will be in place from year to year.
● Financial resources effect all aspects of school activity such as utility costs, infrastructure, and staff wages.
● Inability to cover all necessary expenses and low pay for excellent teachers.
● Declining enrollment results in declining money which limits teacher recruitment and retainment and campus improvements. Reluctant to increase local taxes through mill increase at this time.
● Education budgets stateside are decreasing every year making it difficult to properly compensate teachers and aides. We have been fortunate in retaining our educators, but we have not been able to provide increases in salary that are deserved.
● Inadequate funding is the greatest challenge because it can create many other challenges such as teacher retention, recruiting qualified teachers and support services, inadequate curriculum, and antiquated school facilities.
● ANB should be based on the number of students in your district; not students attending. This policy encourages closer school districts (15+miles) to steal your students.
● Inadequate funding is a direct result of our decreasing/low student enrollment. Our school is doing an excellent job educating our students; however, due to low funds from low enrollment our teachers may be forced to teach more grades which will result in less “teaching” time for each student. Another detriment to our children’s education is the amount of ridiculous paper work from the federal government and the state. It does nothing to improve teaching or achievement. It takes time away from teachers that they could spend actually teaching.
● Because of our lack of enrollment and financial funding our budget is very tight. We have several special needs students who could us aid services, but at this time we cannot offer them.
● Because it takes funding to hire a good teacher.
Challenge: Low student enrollment
● Our enrollment fluctuates greatly over a 3-5 year period; thus our funding fluctuates causing out of balance spending. Our district attracts lower income and special needs students from neighboring district but we are still required to meet their needs.

Table 19. Explanation of Greatest District Challenge by Board Chair (continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Declining student enrollment is due to rural migration to the cities. Rural education is paramount to the community vision of growth and stability.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are a very rural community with a low population. The nearest elementary is 50 miles away. Because of the rural location our enrollment is too low to receive adequate funds to hire and retain teachers. It is important to have our school to maintain quality of family life for our teachers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low student enrollment leads to many other problems. Our costs go up and our income goes down.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At this time, the amount of families with young children is limited. This is a community of older people, with their children grown.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We live in a small rural agricultural area, where families are not having as many children and it includes elderly and older generations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because funding is directly tied to enrollment, as our enrollment has dropped, so will our funding. Like all schools we have a minimum threshold to be able to operate as we currently do.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because it is not going to get any better in the near future. Due to hardships in agriculture there are fewer small family farms and consequently fewer families to support schools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have excellent school facilities and an excellent education program that is capable of handling an additional 20 to 30 students without any significant increase to the school budget. The increase in A-B moneys would make us more efficient and allow us to increase salaries that quality teachers deserve and expand a few programs to keep our school ranking quite high academically. Funding caps make it very challenging to grow in quality.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because our enrollment is low, and my child attends the school, I feel that the threat of school closure is coming. I think our school and teacher exceed the quality of school we would consolidate into, and really hope families with children move to our area to maintain our school.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We currently have 7 students. I'm having trouble spending money from ARRA, etc in right categories. We need money to heat school, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No, or very few, young families in the area. Economy stressing ranches - causing no employment or selling out to wealthy. No solutions in sight! Young people needing employment move elsewhere.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no younger families moving into this area, because of lack of work, cost of properties, etc. With no new families the amount of students is dropping.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are few school age children in the community at this time. There are several children that will be school age in the future, but because other interests and the size of the enrollment we don't know if the parents will send them to our school.
<p>Challenge: Unrealistic federal regulations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unfunded mandates, the more removed people are from us, the more control they want, yet they know the least about what is needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because of small class sizes the odds of meeting No Child Left Behind becomes impossible with their unrealistic expectations. Because we are so rural it is difficult to find teachers that are willing to drive at least 30 miles to work.

Table 19. Explanation of Greatest District Challenge by Board Chair (continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regulations tie our hands on how we can spend the money.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We don't need unrealistic federal regulations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reports that are required are very difficult to get done when you have two teachers that teach all day and computer programs shut down during reporting.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No Child Left Behind is a program that does not meet the needs of the students in our small, rural school. Our learners are unique and do not fit the NCLB model.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unfunded mandates. The more removed people are from us, the more control they want, yet they know the least about what is needed.
<p>Challenge: Unrealistic state regulations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The state keeps making us do different things such as teach Indian education. Then they put out all these different funds that are highly restrictive in how we can use them. Our biggest struggle each year is to stay within our general fund yet still meet all of the state requirements.
<p>Challenge: Inadequate parent involvement</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As a board member I feel our school is in good shape. Finances would be a big problem if it was not for oil and gas reserves. The teachers we have are great and do a fine job. One problem I see though is the involvement of parents. Lack of involvement in their children's life also reflects on their behavior.
<p>Challenge: Threats of school consolidation or closure</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The largest school district in our county takes students from our district without reserve. Our school would be considerably larger if students in our district were required to go to school here. At times they have taken students for the count day and then they send them back to us.
<p>Challenge: Antiquated school facilities</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have enough money for equipment and support but the budget to remodel or update our school is limited and because of that our school facilities are getting behind. We do small things each year but do not have the resources to do any major changes to improve or expand the school.
<p>Challenge: Inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We cannot afford to pay a better wage so some new teachers just use us as a stepping stone to get a better job.
<p>Challenge: Difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Because we live so far from town our payroll is lower than most. The school's living facilities are not very big. Many teachers do not want to teach multi-grades.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is difficult to attract quality teachers from the decreasing pool to our small community.
<p>Challenge: Inadequate curriculum/course offerings</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We have significant technology and cannot use it for distance learning and advance placement classes because of (state) teacher requirements. I think there is great opportunity for education in this area. Bring the best and brightest together through connectivity.

Table 19. Explanation of Greatest District Challenge by Board Chair (continued)

Challenge: Unmotivated students academically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even the greatest teachers, facilities, and programs cannot make someone learn who doesn't want to. Education should be viewed by everyone as a privilege and an opportunity, not a right. The problem is that our society has made education unnecessary to survive via welfare.

Sustainability Reasons

The survey asked the board chair to indicate the importance of eight selected reasons as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in the district. The eight reasons included:

1. Importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth.
2. Importance of school to the community in meeting community development functions or needs (e.g., public forums, family reunions, cooperative extension service meetings).
3. Travel distance is too far for students to attend nearest out-of-district school.
4. Geography and road conditions are safer to travel in winter than nearest out-of-district school.
5. Operating expenditures basically same as schools in other neighboring districts
6. Lack of opposition in the district to closing the school(s).
7. Lack of external pressure (outside of district) to close the school(s).
8. Key politicians representing the rural area strongly support the school(s).

Figure 16 shows that of the 57 school board chairs responding to the survey, almost three-fourths (73.7%) indicated “Extremely Important” regarding the reason *importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth*. Another 19 percent indicated the reason was “Important.”

Figure 16. Educate Children and/or Youth of Community

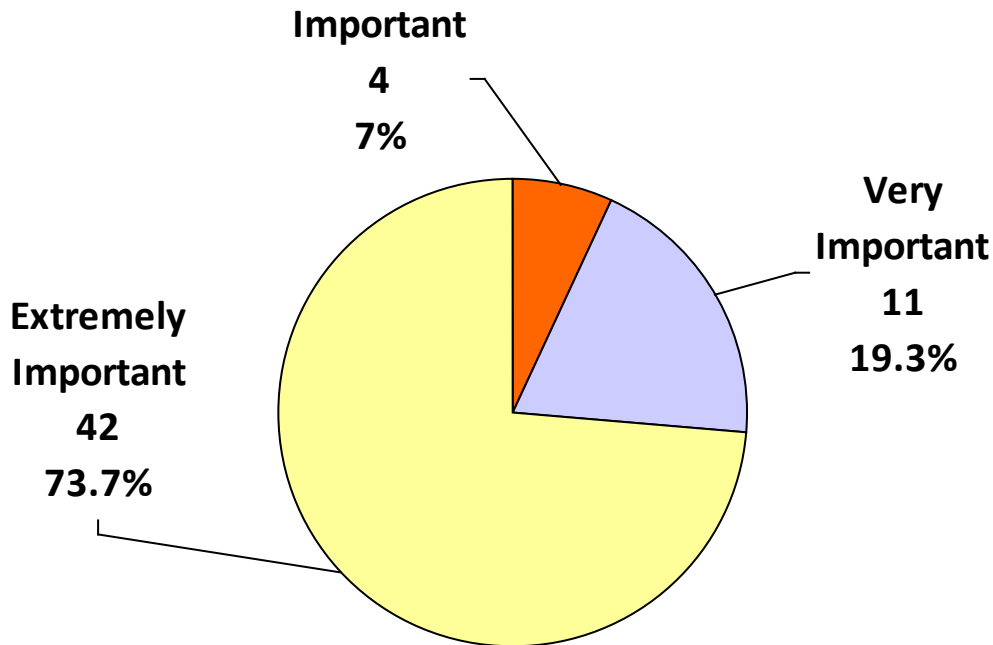


Figure 17 shows the highest percentage of board chairs, one-third, indicated “Very Important” regarding the reason *importance of school to the community in meeting community development functions or needs (e.g., public forums, family reunions, cooperative extension service meetings)*. An additional one-fourth indicated “Important,” and about 18 percent indicated “Extremely Important.” Approximately 10 percent indicated “Not Important.”

Figure 17. Meet Community Development Functions or Needs

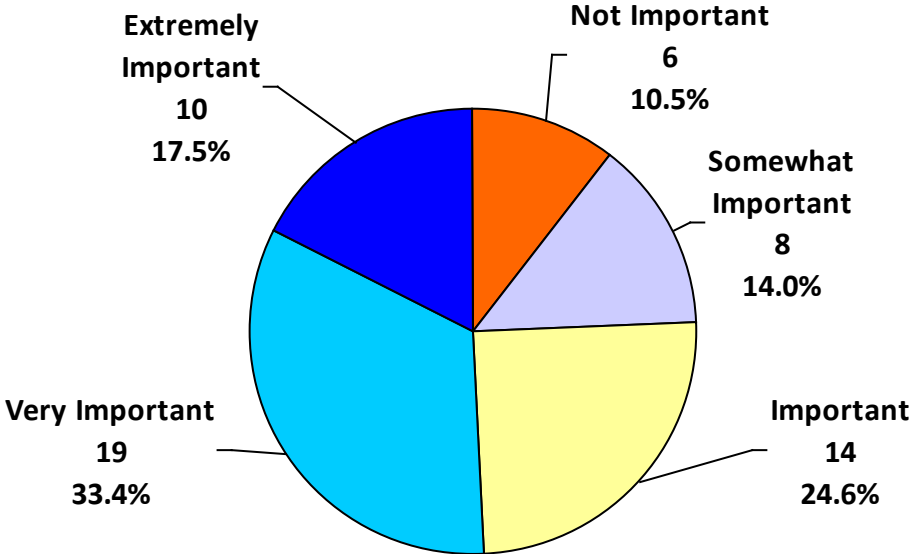


Figure 18 reveals half (50.9%) of respondents indicated *Travel distance is too far for students to attend nearest out-of-district school* as “Very Important” and “Extremely Important.” Approximately 18 percent indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 18. Travel Distance Too Far to School Out of District

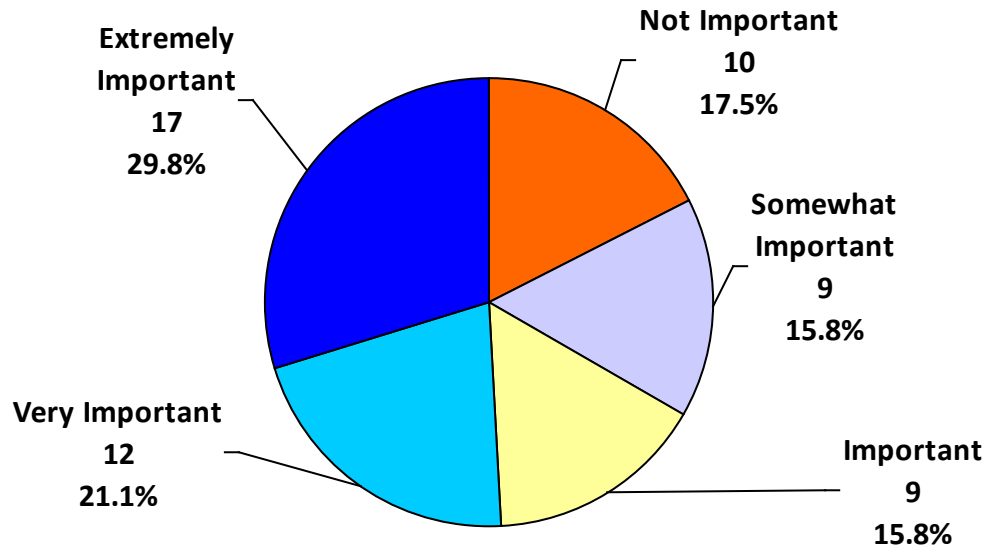
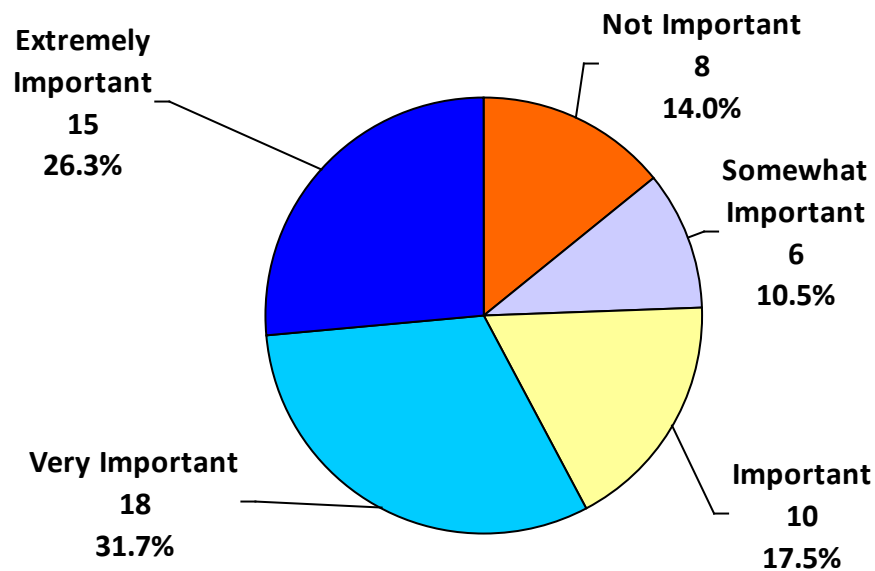


Figure 19 shows almost six in ten board chairs (58.0%) indicated *geography and road conditions are safer to travel in winter than nearest out-of-district school* as “Very Important” and “Extremely Important.” Fourteen indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 19. Geography and Road Conditions Safer



Almost half (48.25) of the board chairs indicated *operating expenditures basically same as schools in other neighboring districts* as “Important” (see Figure 20). Slightly more than one-third (35.7%) indicated “Very Important” and “Extremely Important.” Approximately 11 percent indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 20. School Operating Expenditures Basically Same as Neighboring Districts

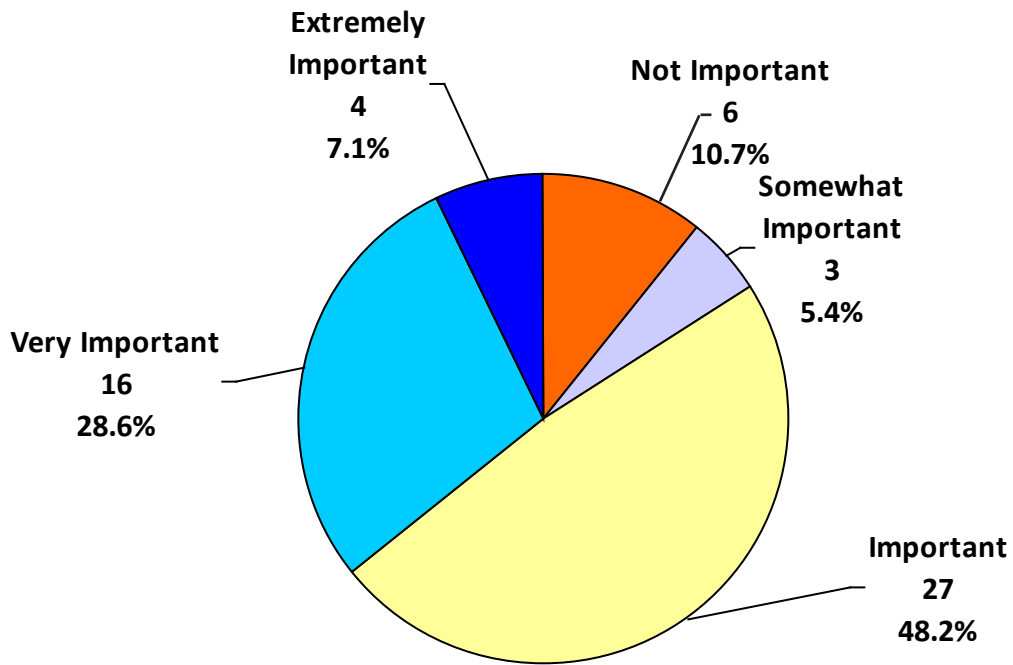
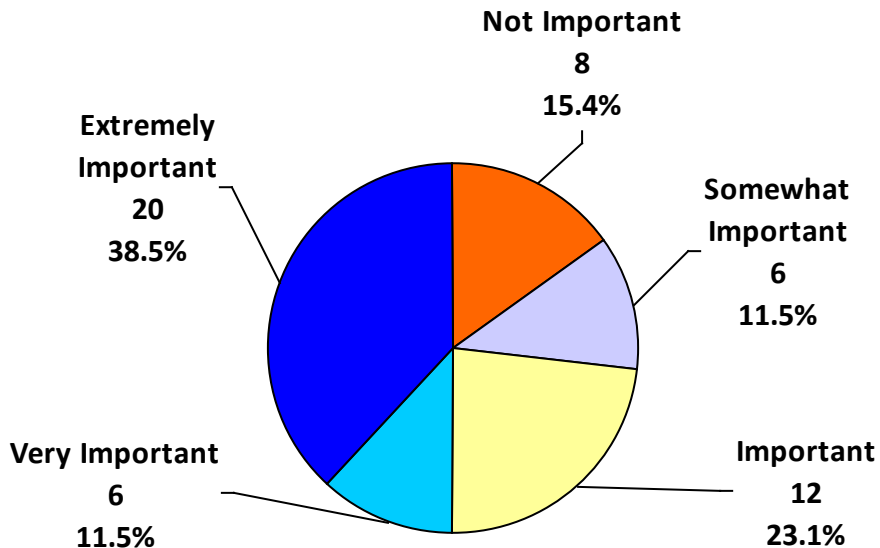


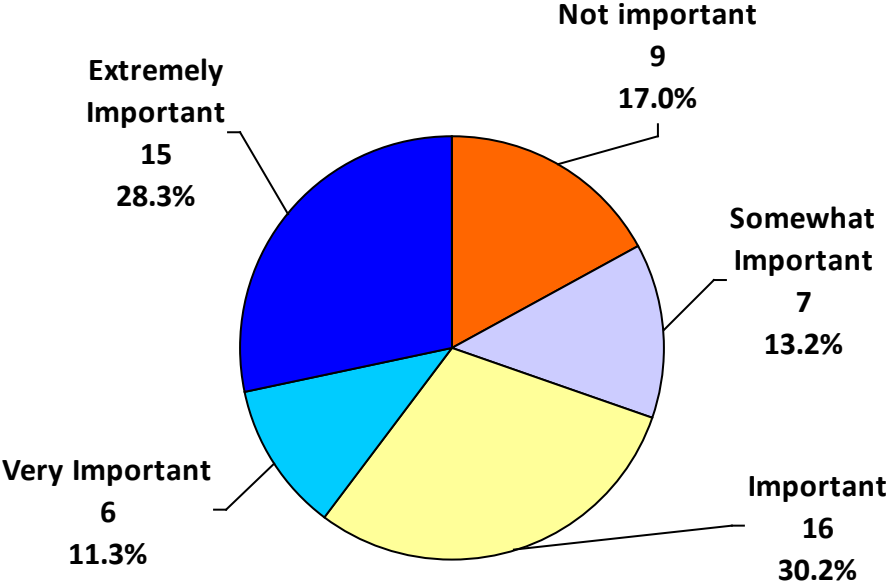
Figure 21 shows more than one-third (38.5%) of the 52 board chairs responding indicated the reason *lack of opposition in the district to closing the school(s)* was “Extremely Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district. Approximately 15 percent indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in their district.

Figure 21. Lack of Opposition in the District to Closing School



Three in ten of the board chairs indicated “Important” (30.2%) or “Extremely Important (28.3%) for the reason *lack of external pressure (outside of district) to close the school(s)*. Seventeen percent indicated the reason was “Not Important” as a consideration in sustaining the small rural public school(s) in the district (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. Lack of External Pressure (Outside of District) to Close School



Eleven board chairs also provided a statement revealing “other” reasons the school was being sustained, as follows:

1. Cheaper and provide a better education than big schools.
2. Community support.
3. Contribution of money and labor by community.
4. Great board-teacher partnership and school-parent partnership.
5. Many generations of families have gone here. They support keeping the school open.
6. Excellent education that is provided to our kids.
7. Operating expenses are way less (than in neighboring district).
8. Quality education and student to teacher ratio.
9. Strong opposition in the district to closing schools.
10. Tax increases worry family ranchers.
11. Taxpayers willing to support school.

Most Important Decision in Next 3 Years

Board chairs were also asked to describe the most important decision the school board will likely have to make regarding sustainability of the district’s public school(s) in the next three years. Forty-one of the board chairs provided a statement, as follows:

1. Alluring out of district attendees.
2. As our ANB goes down so does our funding and it will be even harder to have the money to find a qualified teacher.
3. Balancing financial decisions with decreasing enrollment.
4. Combine classes.
5. Currently we have been able to operate within state budget plus REAP monies. If REAP were to disappear we would struggle to find support to make up the difference.
6. Cutting out staff positions and more unemployment in our community.
7. Cutting positions.
8. Discipline and the child.
9. Enrollment.
10. Enrollment cannot decrease.
11. Finances, enrollment and federal and state regulations.
12. Finding teachers to keep all classes available.
13. Funding decisions that allow the board to sustain adequate numbers of teachers to best meet the needs of the diverse grade levels while maintaining facilities and up to date curriculum and technology.
14. Having the funds to keep good teachers when enrollment drops some of these years and housing for teachers.
15. How to deal with special needs students.
16. How to increase student enrollment and welcome back existing in district students currently not attending.
17. How to keep the school open with declining student population in addition to state funding.
18. How to maintain quality education with funding caps that lag behind the ever increasing inflationary costs of doing business.
19. How to manage the school if our enrollment drops to zero or how to recruit more students.
20. If enrollment will allow school to remain open and if district will continue to have the budget to operate on.
21. If district will have the funds to keep the school open.
22. If there will be enough students to operate.
23. Lack of students will lower funding, it is difficult to hire good teachers with no funding is available.
24. Leadership.
25. Maintaining budget requirements.
26. Making AYP requirement of NCLB and funding.
27. Need everyone to be aware that independent districts need to stay independent. Awareness that consolidation is not needed.
28. Number of students.
29. Retaining second full-time teacher to meet the needs of spread of K-8 grade students.
30. Revenue – money to operate.
31. Size of staff (i.e., teacher and aides) based on budget and number of students.
32. Student enrollment will drastically affect decisions such as fewer teachers and other employees.
33. The issue of people sending children to a rural school vs. a more populated school.
34. Most important decision will be if district can keep the school open with the present number of school-age students in the community.
35. Most important issue the board will face is enrollment.
36. To close the school.
37. We may have to raise taxes, not because district receives insufficient funding, but because the state limits district's ability to use the various funds. It results in a lack of general funds, yet district has other funds it barely or never can use.

- 38. Will need sufficient funds to hire qualified teachers.
- 39. Whether or not to close for low enrollment.
- 40. What the minimal number of students must be to justify keeping the school open.
- 41. Whether to run a special mill levy election.

Results: Focus Groups

Forty-nine individuals suggested as strong supporters of the frontier community school participated in the focus group sessions. Table 20 shows the date and location of the six focus group sessions. The 35 cars or trucks that brought the 49 participants traveled 3,282 miles, a round trip on average of 93.8 miles to reach the focus group session location. One husband and wife traveled 240 miles round trip to attend the session in “their area.” This reflects the long distance that residents may need to travel to attend a meeting in some rural areas of Montana served by frontier schools.

Table 20. Location and Date of Focus Group Session

Location	Date
Butte	March 24, 2010
Shelby	March 25, 2010
Havre	March 29, 2010
Wolf Point	March 30,2010
Miles City	March 31, 2010
Billings	April 1, 2010

This section provides a summary of each focus group session in the order in which they were held. In each session, participants were asked to respond to eight questions:

1. What characteristics best describe the school in your community for which you are a supporter?

Probes:

- a. What do parents of students in the school say about the school?
- b. What do other persons in the community or area say about the school?

2. Is the school valued by the parents and community (or area) it serves?

Please explain why, or why not?

3. What is the greatest challenge facing the school over the next 3 years?

Probes:

- a. Which challenge seems to be a common topic by your school board members?
- b. What do others in the area say most often as an issue that could affect the future of the school?

4. What would you recommend as a possible solution to the challenge?

Probes:

- a. What should parents of students in the school do to address the challenge?
- b. What should other persons in the community (area) do to address the challenge?

5. Why has the school been sustained?

Probes:

- a. If the school closed what impact would it have on families of students who now attend?
- b. If the school closed what impact would it have on the community/area served by the school?

6. Looking into the future five years, how do you think the school will be different from today?

Probes:

- a. Will the amount of student enrollment or kind of students enrolled be different?
- b. Will the teachers and/or teaching and learning be different?
- c. Will the physical features of the building be different?

7. What must supporters in the community of frontier schools do if they want the school to be sustained and viable for meeting the needs of students?

Probe:

- a. What actions must supporters of the school in the community take?

8. Do you have comments you would like to make about your school and or community that you did not get to make?

Butte, MT Session

School Characteristics

One participant noted that her K-6 school offers an older quality program but no one else knows it. Another emphasized their K-8 school has good teachers, good programs, and good test scores. There is more one-on-one teacher involvement with each student. Teachers work with students. The school conducts science fairs, a Christmas program, and spring programs. The school is not in trouble. One participant noted the K-8 school has two teachers, allowing more attention for individual students. The K-8 school has advanced from where it was before. Sometimes folks in the community complain about petty issues.

Valued School

One participant noted that unfortunately the one's who don't value the school are heard more. Another participant explained that parents reflect valley values. Sometimes people in the neighboring town complain even though they need services. A participant noted most people value the school; a few parents home school their children. Another noted that the community is very supportive of kids and school events. "Once in a while a fairness question is dealt with, usually fueled by word of mouth or the 'rumor mill.'" Another participant noted that education is valued in the area by school and community.

A participant recalled that some programs from out of district are also present or connect with the school, such as the micro-teaching program at the University of Montana at Western. These programs also help bring folks together; the teachers get to connect with other teachers. School programs also offer special needs, such as deaf or special needs students get individualized attention. The participant noted that "if space is available the school takes kids from outside the district area."

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

One participant explained a major challenge will be building maintenance and upkeep. “We need a new well.” Another participant noted the population in the area is going down and the school has few students in grades 5, 6, and 8. Loss of teachers, resources, and aides may result. A participant explained in some cases enrollment is declining because parents are taking their kids to schools in Helena. In other cases parents with children do not want to move to the area served by the small school.

Another participant also noted that the school currently has two teachers and only 10 students and enrollment is declining. Maintenance funding is an issue. A participant noted that keeping parents happy will be an issue because they don’t like local substitute teachers but they really do value the school. They help hold a fundraising dinner and local coyote players attract grants that are also good for the economy. However, one participant indicated that the school “can’t do fundraisers because some parents complain about the teacher and the teacher is afraid to get involved in the community.”

Solutions

When asking for possible solutions to the challenges, several participants offered recommendations. One participant suggested that a formal complaint system should be established rather than a person going directly to the teacher or school board member with the complaint. A process is needed that is fair. Another participant suggested this might not be a viable solution for addressing the declining enrollment. Two participants noted that funds must be attracted for maintenance of the school. One suggested that the Census data should be used to identify rich people who own property in the area but don’t live in the school district. They might be willing to contribute to the school.

Sustaining the School

When asked why the school has been sustained, one participant explained “the school is a great community resource of education for students.” Another participant noted that the school brings six or seven jobs in the community. Other participants explained if the school did not exist the parents would have a 26-mile drive to take their child to the nearest school; another participant noted it would be a 36-mile drive if the school in the area was closed. Participants emphasized this in addition to the job losses, closing the school would move the kids further away from their homes. It also would be a long drive for any after school activities—and a long bus ride for students, as much as 100 miles. One participant noted that the nearest school in Helena is already overcrowded. One participant noted that “if we did not sustain the school the community wouldn’t exist.”

Future (Next 5 Years)

When asked how the school might be different from today in the next five years, one participant noted that declining student enrollment is a real problem. Another perceived that providing access for handicapped students or persons at the school would be a problem with all the regulations that must be met. Most participants believed the school would remain, with teachers doing pretty much what they have been doing. One participant noted that “People will sustain it if there is not outside interference.” Some participants believed if the school had more than one teacher that it might lose a teacher and or a teacher’s aide. Others believed the money would be found to address the problems to maintain the school. One noted that perhaps a local bus would be donated to the school. Several believed that the school district personnel and the community would begin to rally together and ask more for help to keep the school, as well as begin to more aggressively sell the positive aspects of the school and living in the community.

Supporters Must Do

When asked what the supporters in the community must do if they want the school to be sustained and viable for meeting the needs of students, participants in the focus group session offered the following comments:

- Stay positive.
- Advocate school in the community.
- Thank supporters.
- Increase community advocacy.
- Develop more positive voices for the school.
- Reach out to other small schools and network with them.
- Small communities must come together at fairs and events.

Shelby, MT Session

School Characteristics

One participant noted: “I believe that there is a quality education system in place. It’s not so much just trying to get kids graduated. That they actually are trying to prepare them for further on in life.” Another participant also chose to offer a positive aspect to describe the school: “Three of the last four years our school has won the Class C scholars versus athletes GPA ratio for lettering athletes, which is good.” Another participant noted, however, that “since No Child Left Behind came in it seems like the accelerated programs that they still have are basically learn at your own pace. Our oldest son is in an accelerated math program and he basically is left on his own. It’s like here’s your book and I’ll try and get to you if you need help but basically I’ve got to work with the kids that are having problems.”

A participant described the school by noting the teacher was very hands on. “Compared to when I grew up, the teachers seem to really care. They care a lot for the kids as far as home life and school life. Our kindergartener has six kids in her class, and my son has 11 kids, I think.” The participant continued:

“I’m impressed with how the teacher in the first and second grade does because there are some kids that are maybe struggling with stuff, and then some of the first graders are up into the second grade level. They are very, very good about keeping on top of that, but they are a smaller school too so they are able to. They don’t have to deal with 20 kids. Last year there were substitute teachers that would come out to the school. So our kids definitely benefit from being in a smaller school. They work with them a lot ... They have a lot of opportunities to go on field trips and to go do stuff that I don’t think they would have a chance to if they were in a bigger school ... There’s about forty seven students in the school.”

Valued School

When asked to give examples of how the school is valued, participants shared how the parents or community came together to support the school’s needs. One participant noted that “the parents and PTA, everybody, rallied and scraped up money to put in a new playground... It looked like a \$200 bunch of pipe to me. It was beyond my understanding what that stuff cost.” Another participant explained how the secretary at the school who lives in a neighboring town actually brought three students with her from the town school—and the town school was across the street from the students’ home. In other cases the parents work together to provide transportation for students who live a long distance from the school. One participant who is a supporter of a K-12 school noted that “I think our community is mixed on how they support our school. There are those who support our school very well when it comes to sports. We have a very loyal sports following. I think not so much when it comes to academics.”

In describing who supports the school one participant recalled statistics about the aging population of the community’s residents and consequently it was mostly the parents who had children or grandchildren in the school who were the supporters. The participant noted that “By the year 2025, I think our population will be like 57 percent 65 and older. So I’m hoping we can hang on to enough families to keep our school. You know, because you get that much of an age differential. But those that do support the school support the school quite well.”

A participant noted that the administrator is valued at the school because of the way things are handled and kids do well academically. For example, “They have kept our music program even with such a small budget. We have boosters who fight tooth and nail to keep our music program in short budget times.” In commenting on the music programs another participant explained that the music boosters had held three fund raisers that are planned months ahead. “And a lot of people get involved. Each class probably has four or five kids that are in the music program and yet you go to a music booster meeting and there will be fifty parents there which is almost both of almost every kid’s parents who are actively involved and raising funds for new equipment, robes for the choir, new shirts, things like that.” Another participant said that “People will show up at the school board meetings and hear what the school board is saying. If there’s ways that they can trim money without losing things, that’s the premier option all the time. If not, they say we need a six mill levy or whatever, put it on the ballot and it will pass.

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

One participant noted keeping an adequate level of funding with decreasing enrollment is probably the greatest challenge. “If you’d look, you can probably draw a straight line graph starting in 12th grade and descending in number of students down to kindergarten.” Losing just one student makes a difference, as

one participant noted, “When you’re talking about 10 kids in a class and you gain one kid, that’s a 10 percent enrollment increase, so that matters.”

Attracting or keeping students of color is a challenge in some schools. One participant noted that “I think there are three or four black kids and a couple of Hispanic kids in town now. That wasn’t that way before. We actually had some black kids in town, and they’re actually in the adjoining school district now because they had problems which are understandable. Our community made it a little tough for them...for the family as a whole.”

Keeping the building up, doing maintenance is a challenge according to one participant who attended school board meetings. The participant noted the boiler is getting pretty old, the roof on one section of the school is in desperate need of repair, windows are old or substandard and it will take a large amount of money to make the repairs or replacements. Less funding requires hard decisions. For example, one participant explained that a new kindergarten teacher was hired and her job looks secure for about five years, but the building is old, and as funds are needed to make the repairs the decision may have to be made to eliminate the kindergarten teacher.

Solutions

Finding things in the community that will attract other people to move into the community is a solution to some of the funding and enrollment challenges according to one participant. For example, the participant noted how the town “got the wind farm going and got a bid for the border patrol, and that got expanded when they built the new building.” One participant explained, however, that not all towns have a vision for the future.

“They don’t have vision like that. I mean basically our population is stagnant and shrinking as one farm buys the next farm. Then instead of having two families with kids you have one family’s worth of kids with a limited space of land. And over the course of time, like in the 1970s, everyone was having five kids on the farm and now two is the norm. And the trending is downwards still with a larger portion of the population becoming senior citizens that’s looking bleak. Like I said we would have been really hurting this year if we hadn’t gotten 15 to 20 kids new in the school as basically a bleed over from (a nearby town) economy.”

Some participants perceive the solution is to educate the public more about the needs of the school, noting that unless you are a parent you really don’t know what is going on at the school. As one participant explained: “Our seniors have their own problems, and those that are not quite yet seniors that don’t so much have the kids don’t know what the school is trying to deal with and what they have to deal with, with their shrinking budgets. They think all schools have millions of dollars and that’s just not a reality.”

Some participants explained that the school must have a good reputation and the secretary can be a good person to build relationships with parents who are looking for a school, especially if they live in a nearby town. The word gets out among parents regarding the quality of the school and the teacher. Relationships and reputation are important. And it helps if bus drivers and schedules can accommodate picking kids up in the most flexible way. Another participant perceived the solution to the funding problems is for “people on the school side to be active in politics. Keep them pressuring the politicians to remember the school needs when they’re doing budgets.”

Sustaining the School

Most participants explained how the small school contributes to a quality of education student receive as the reason for sustaining the school. As one participant noted, “It’s been sustained because the parents realize the value of a small school and small classes. Honestly, if our school closed tomorrow, kids would all end up in the closest town and life would go on. But the parents see the value in having the school, sending their kids to a small rural school, and support it for that reason.”

Another participant explained that because the student in the school interact with students in the neighboring high school, where they must transfer to after they complete the K-8 school program, the K-8 school students and high school students have friends who have been to both schools. They naturally support each other. Students who go on to the high school do well academically.

Travel distance was the reason the school was sustained according to some participants. But for others, not sustaining the school would likely have a major negative impact on the local economy.

“If they had to consolidate, we would lose teachers, we’d lose jobs. It would hurt. When we consolidated just the three schools that we did into one, we lost two secretaries. The two secretaries from there just retired I guess. We lost teachers. Several teachers opted to retire and some didn’t get their contracts renewed. We had to mash everything together, and I think if we had to consolidate again with the other school system that would further really hurt our economy.”

One participant explained how a previous consolidation caused both job losses and fewer students when two towns consolidated three schools each into one in a neighboring town. “There used to be six schools, now each of those towns has a school building in it. So there are two schools left now and if they consolidate with another town there will be five empty buildings in the other towns. The problem with consolidation is the teachers that have the most kids are the ones that don’t get brought into the newly consolidated school. They are the young teachers that don’t have tenure. They’re the ones that get shipped elsewhere. The teachers that have the seniority, their kids are gone. So when we consolidated with another town, the teachers that had three or four kids no longer worked in the school... And you lost those people out of your community. So now you’ve got empty housing that’s not getting filled back up, you’ve got them not buying groceries at the grocery store, or getting medical treatment at your local clinic. So then the grocery store is laying off an employee or two employees....Once again, if you’re talking about the breadwinner of a family, and they have no job in the town after consolidation, they’re gone.”

The Future (Next 5 Years)

One participant explained how Montana had been fortunate to escape the bad effects of the recession. But if the state economy worsened, it might be likely that parents would have to send their kids to a different school as result of some kind of forced allotment system. This could be the future “if a penny could be saved—and it would be the path of least resistance.” Another participant predicted the selling off of small farms/ranches to larger ranches would continue to result in loosing school-age children. As result the community would be looking at consolidating with the schools down the Highline.

Other participants explained that with the declining enrollments parents would have to pay for programs or materials that previously were free. For example, a participant noted that students in the woodshop classes now had to buy their own wood. Another said they now have to pay fees for students to be in the sports.

Supporters Must Do

When asked what must supporters in the community of frontier schools do if they want the school to be sustained and viable for meeting the needs of students, one participant suggested that the supporters must have a louder voice. According to this participant, “On our local level I think they need to be aware of what’s going on in our schools. If they feel strongly enough, become a supporter, raise your voice, stand up, and be counted. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

“We have to let the larger public and the representatives for our state and national government realize that rural schools need help as well. We are out here and yes we are plugging away. And yes we have good schools and we don’t face some of the problems that urban schools face, but we have our own problems that we have to face and deal with every day.”

Another participant said: “I think that fight has to go all the way to Washington. Bail out banks, and bail out car dealerships, and bail out all these people, don’t forget about the school.”

Other Comments

Additional comments offered by participants included:

- Just keep fighting for funding and for support for education.
- I absolutely love our school. I would honestly be crushed if we had to send them someplace else. I think when they’re in a smaller school, it’s just a different atmosphere.
- It’s amazing when you have a teacher that cares enough, for one, to take two kids or four kids or seven kids and just spend every minute they can. It’s amazing the kind of education they can get.
- I think keeping a lot of the politics out of school that really don’t have to be there. How many people can you afford to fight whether you can say the pledge because it has God in it or stuff like that? It was not a Christmas program at the school this year. It was a holiday pageant. If you don’t celebrate Christmas, you know, we have other songs in there. They sang a Chanukah song and they sang a Kwanza song. And that’s great. That’s fine. That’s dandy. Because we are a nation of different things, and we need to incorporate all of that. But, you know what, if we start squabbling about things like that, then the big things that really matter, our kid’s education and preparing them for life [is being neglected].
- Funding should not be tied to control, like the 55 mph speed limit that we had. We’ll give you money for your highways (says the federal government). Would you like money for your highways? Why sure, we’ve got potholes all over the place. Okay, here’s the money but you have to have a 55 mph speed limit. I’m going to tell you how to run your life, the decisions that you should make. The people in the community should have the right to decide how to run their community and how they want to run their school. An oversight program should be an oversight program. If it says, this is messed

up, we gave them \$200 million and they wasted it, they went out and bought ten traveler buses, then that should be an oversight program. That should be said, you know, hey that was a poor use of your money. You shouldn't tell me spend your \$200 million on 17 pencils, 200 rolls of toilet paper, whatever. If I can't figure out how many rolls of toilet paper we need in our school, well then I should pay the consequences for that but I shouldn't have to have somebody tell me every little detail. Come walk a mile in our shoes. Personally, I'd rather not have the money.

Havre, MT Session

School Characteristics

One participant described the school as a place where teachers feel free to talk with the parents or even another school teacher if they have a problem and vice versa. Another participant pointed out key features of a school this way: "We have a really strong school system. We are K-12 with 98 students. We have top notch teachers that just enjoy being there. They're not the kind who is riding it out to the bitter end thinking oh I can retire after this. They want to be there. Our students are scoring well in all areas when it comes down to the testing that comes back. It's a friendly school. ... It's like, well, who are you going to take to the prom because it's not ever really going to be like a date because it's so friendly."

The participant further explained how a little girl born with a disability, a crooked leg, was encouraged to do anything like the other children, even play hockey. The participant noted: "They just look at her like she's cool. It's just no big deal. I think to myself how wonderful that would be for my child, if I had a child with a disability. I even think though, that I feel safe when my kids go to school and don't worry about them. They're safe and I know there's not going to be troubles in the school. And if there is anything, any of the teachers can call me. I know them all by name. I won't trade that."

Another participant described the K-8 school as a place where parents in town want to send their children—to the country school. "I think it provides one on one education that you can't get anywhere else. That's invaluable today.... We have a lot of students that come out from Havre and the reason that they do is the parents feel they need that one on one... They get that education and they're able to go back to their high school and do well as a student, generally speaking, because they had that one on one (in the K-8 country school). I think that's real important. There's kids out there that need that kind of education."

Another participant also described the country school in another community: "I just think that they're definitely a necessity. I guess that's how I would describe ours. It's a necessity. It's a good place. We need to have a good foundation for our kids, as far as keeping the family closer to home, because once we have to shuttle the kids to town it's a whole new world out there. And it puts a greater stress, I think, on the family, on the family unit." This participant lived 38 miles from town and explained that if the children had to go to the town school that would mean the mother and kids would be living in town during the week while the father lived and worked on the farm. The participant explained the stress caused on the family unit, noting: "We have to farm them out. We have to rent a house. The wives have to go to town. It's a hardship financially. It's a hardship emotionally. It's a great sacrifice."

One participant described the school as closely associated with the culture of agriculture, as a way of life that was much different than life in town. "It's a culture. That's how you'd say it, a heritage. Yeah, that's a good way of saying it. And the education is superb. I mean, we have computers. We have everything that the big schools have. It's a great education, one on one." Another participant commented on the same school, noting

if there are problems the parents help solve them: “You can resolve them easily. They’re good kids. I mean, I’ll tell you, these country kids, they’re good kids.”

A participant described how if a teacher needs to slow down or teach a kid at a higher level they are able to do it, even with students of different grade levels in the same classroom. Further, the participant noted: “I think also the kids learn, when you have a fifth grader and then you have an eighth grader in the same classroom. The fifth grader is listening to what the teacher is telling the eighth grader and they’re learning because it’s a multi-grade classroom. The kids are really learning, and I think that’s why they excel at these country schools.” Another participant with three children in a K-8 school with 40 students explained the effectiveness of the multi-grade classroom and the school environment.

“So there are two grades under each teacher except kindergarten, normally. What they learn their first year in the class is reinforced by listening to the older kids’ lessons. One thing I like about my school is that it’s like a big family. Out on the playground the older kids are looking out after the younger kids. They are learning how to change speeds when they have to play with the little kids. They are interacting with all the age levels. There’s no fighting, there’s no bullying. Teachers know when a student is struggling and she’ll pull them aside, him or her, and get extra help so those kind of issues are handled by the teachers. They don’t need any extra help.”

Valued School

Participants in the focus group offered numerous examples of how they, other parents, and community members valued the school in their community. One participant noted: “It’s a whole different life when they have to go to town. My kids would be gone, you know, I’d have to leave by 5:30am, maybe 6am if the roads were good to get them to the bus so they can ride the bus 15 or 16 miles. We would have to drive them 25 miles to get them to the bus, or move to town.”

In explaining how the K-8 school with five students is valued, one participant noted “Our school is very valued by the community because we do school picnics; we do 4-H meetings at the school, card parties, and our Christmas programs. The whole community gets together and the kids do a skit or a play for the Christmas program. Yeah, it’s kind of the basis of the community when we get together.” The participant further explained, with many other participants nodding heads in agreement. In the country the small schools are necessity because of the desire to keep the children involved in ranching, in agribusiness. Most of the small towns are agricultural based areas. Parents desire to keep the kids involved and teach them along the way. The participant noted: “So by sending them to town, from kindergarten all the way up, they’ve missed out on learning about ranching. They learn to work. And they’re important to the community.”

Another participant explained why parents value the school; if the children were in town, about 30 miles away, and if a child became sick it is a long way to go before you get to the school in town. Moreover, the participant pointed out that a town school with hundreds of kids is a good place to pick up the flu or other illnesses. Another participant explained that with an older population they have few kids in the school but parents in the town school send their kids because the kids are getting lost in the big school. As result many parents in town want one-on-one teaching for their children and send them to the country school.

A Hutterite parent noted that for them it also is more than one-on-one. The school helps pass on important Hutterite traditions, or enables the children to remain in the home community that supports the Hutterite traditions. The Hutterite families speak German in the home environment. For some Hutterite families the

students, “go to German school for half an hour, then they have the English school. After that they have German school again so they are constantly learning. That’s why the school is convenient... So when school is out at 3:30 then we have German school because they have to also learn the German as they do the English.”

One participant noted that it is simply about distance and way of life.

“If (the school) closes down you lose all the good people that are teaching there, and more than likely everything will follow. Everything will close because the families will leave so then there’s nobody to support our store and the restaurant/bar and then the businesses that are in town, which aren’t very many, but to us they are important. If we lose the school, it’s 35 miles to (the next school)....That is not an option. It would be a 50-mile trip for her (wife). It would split the family. The husband would have to stay home and run the ranch, and she would have to go to town. In this society, we like what we have, and we’re not willing to give it up. And if it takes all of us having to go sit on the legislative steps, we’re willing.”

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

According to one participant, funding is the challenge. “The challenge is trying to keep the school operating with everything that’s required, like having the counselors and the Title I programs when the school might have only one student that needs the program. But you’ve got to have that program full time.” The participant noted the school has five children and may have only three in a couple of years. Declining enrollment greatly affects funding.

Another participant noted the challenge in the next five years will be hiring a new teacher, “getting the kind of teacher that you really want.” A participant explained:

“We have a couple teachers that are close to retiring, and they are really good teachers. And they would be pretty hard to replace, and I hope that when that day comes that somebody steps up to the plate and is willing to take a lesser salary without benefits...and stay with the kids and be of benefit to the kids in the school. It could be a challenge.”

Adding to the challenge of attracting a new teacher, one Hutterite participant explained the most challenge is “when we’re hiring teachers it is the road, coming off of the highway out to the school, the last 10 miles. Even if the teacher wants to come out there, when she drives that road once she thinks actually we’re crazy. Now how do they expect us to haul our kids on that road twice each day. It would be four times a day in and out, to have them go to town and the school. I mean, the rocks they put on that road as gravel to run on are too big. It is unsafe road conditions.” As one participant noted with the bad winter weather and that kind of road conditions if the children had to go to the town school, there would be a lot of absences and a lot of days to make up.

Some participants pointed out that it is all about money and the mentality “out there.” The mentality that the kids should go to the town school, but focus group participants perceive money following the student is the issue because many schools are losing students. “It is about the money and ...the competition for students.”

Solutions

One participant noted that perhaps the redefining of school district boundaries might help solve some declining enrollment problems and consequently increase funding for the school. Several participants expressed the need to become more active as a voice for the school. As one participant noted, “I think people just have to talk a little bit louder about how good an education they get because you’re dealing with a smaller number of students in these schools. Sometimes I don’t think their voice is heard. I don’t think the parents say enough either about how great the education is in these small schools. They have to toot their own horns more and make some noise. Otherwise you just get engulfed by the bigger schools. I mean, at some point when it comes to really fighting for funding, it’s important that people have a voice and talk about the school.”

Sustaining the School

Passing a levy to sustain the school is possible in some communities, according to one respondent, who remarked: “I think a lot of people are very supportive of having a school in the rural area because if they have a family that comes in or a son that comes back with a family, they want to be able to have the school there.” The participant also explained that parents from the nearest town will send their kids to the country school because they are “falling through the cracks” in the larger town school and want the one-on-one teaching for the child in the K-8 grades.

Another participant explained that it’s an issue of having a school in the community when trying to attract other people to come to the community. They’re not likely to do that unless they know there’s a school for their children. As the participant noted, the school must be sustained “to educate our kids because we don’t want to send them to town. We want to keep them at home. The hired men are coming out with families. And if you’re trying to get a good hired man, he’s not going to go out there and leave his wife in town.”

The bus ride is too far for some students, or a culture shock they seek to avoid. “For us it would be a culture shock. For our children to get on a bus in the morning, it would be a culture shock. Plus, our kids would be the first ones on the bus and the last ones off at the school...They’d be lucky if they’d be off the bus in an hour.” Another participant noted that a family member would have to drive the child to the bus and the child would have a school day of about 12 hours away from home. “If it was a first grade or kindergartener, they wouldn’t learn anything because they would be so tired.” Another participant explained the school is sustained because the generations have gone to the school, and they want their children to go to the school. The past generations strongly support the school. The result for some parents is that if the school was not sustained, their choice would be to home school the children. In some cases the parents don’t have time to home school the child but would do it anyway by sitting them in front of the computer, thus providing the child little instruction and a bad education, according to one participant. All participants agreed, “Our schools are part of our communities. If we lose them, then we lose our communities.”

The Future (Next 5 Years)

Most participants thought the school would still be in the community in five years. The numbers of students, though small, would still justify having the school. Some participants perceived that the number of students might increase in the next five years. One participant noted that the technology in the school would likely change “to keep up with the times.” Schools have added more computers in the past to accommodate needs of students and teachers.

Reacting to comments about using and buying text books, one participant noted: “But I think the time will come all that stuff will come right off the internet. Every child will have his own little PC there. And they will just put in a server so the teacher can just go to all their computers...instead of relying on textbooks.” But technology capacity varied among the participants, some had a satellite or fiber optic connection, while others still had dial up because “we are at the end of the road.” One participant hoped for a paved road in the next five years. Most participants predicted the school would be sustained because people like those in the room would unite to have a stronger voice to demand support for the school.

Supporters Must Do

One participant added to the previous comment about increasing the voice for the small school, noting: “I think though, farmers and ranchers in general are really bad about complaining at the coffee table but then after that we go to the fields and we go check cows. We’re going to have to get together. We’re going to have to as a group, and say no, you’re not closing us down, period. We’ll fight you. We’ll do whatever it takes. We’re not going to just lay down and say ‘Oh well I guess we’ll just do what they want.’”

Another participant added, we need “knowledgeable representatives to take our feelings and opinions to the people that need to hear it, because we’re all not going to be able to go to Helena (the capitol). That’s what our representatives are for, but I don’t always feel that they do that.” Another participant explained, “But first you start with a community representative. You go baby steps. You can’t just get in the van and go to Helena and say ‘Listen to what I want.’ You have to go through the hoops. I think that definitely has to happen. I don’t know if everybody knows how to make that happen. That’s kind of why we’re here (at this meeting). We want to know how to help ourselves.”

“I think that the things that a lot of people said here today people don’t know about. They don’t realize. There is a lot of pride, but also you have to put a value on your school. What does your school offer as a value to the people, the state, and the community because you’re never going to get anywhere unless you bring them in with some sort of value. What value does the school have for the community, the state, and everything else? What are you producing there? That’s what the bottom line is and I think that’s really important because we are producing good students. Some of the kids that are coming out go to college. They may come back and farm. They might be engineers somewhere. That’s what you’re turning out of the school. There is a huge amount of value to the smaller schools and the education that they provide, and I think that’s the most important message that people can get out there. That’s what really has to happen.”

One participant also noted that the traditional values are a plus for the school’s graduates. But that may be less of a value today. As one participant noted, “More traditional values and maybe that’s not something that town people, bigger cities, put a value on as much. We do and that’s part of our success story.” One participant further explained that not all children want to leave the area. “They didn’t leave. They love this life, they want to be in it, and they want to raise their kids in it. I think that comes from enjoying the school that they grew up in and the type of lifestyle that they were involved in. It is appealing to the children of our children. Not all of them. But a lot of them will come back and be the next generation of us.”

Participants provided numerous examples of how children who attended the small school now live in the community and work as nurses, run their own business (e.g., outfitting), or are ranchers. Examples included professionals (e.g., medical doctors) who came back to the community because they did not want to raise their children in a large city like Houston, Texas. Several participants also seemed to express the sentiment

noted by one participant, who commented: “I also think that the farmers and ranchers pay a pile of property taxes. So I feel like we, our children, deserve an education and we deserve a school out there for as much property tax as we pay. I think we pay way more than our share.”

Other Comments

Participants also expressed how the small schools were a historical landmark for their communities. Lastly, the participants indicated an appreciation for the opportunity to get to discuss the small school in their communities. One noted, “I ‘d like to thank you for giving us a chance to voice our opinions.” It was apparent that seldom have the supporters of frontier schools had an opportunity to discuss challenges and issues with other supporters.

Wolf Point, MT Session

School Characteristics

A participant described the K-8 school as “a very good school out there,” The school has a good school board and eight children with two full-time teachers. The school has only 6 grades this year; no students in two grades. Each teacher has four students. The school serves Hutterite students. The school is in a new building. The school is the bottom story and the church is the upper story.

Valued School

The school is highly valued as it serves the Hutterite Colony. The Colony purchased a one-story building from town and moved it to the current location. The Colony prepared the basement foundation to place the building on. They hired a person to come in and build the second story. The school is the first story of the building. The building is wheel chair accessible and can serve handicapped individuals.

The church part of the building also serves as the location for the children to learn the German language, the language that Hutterites speak in the home and with each other. German school and Sunday school occurs in the upper story of the building. The school is in a new building in the bottom story and the church is in the upper story.

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

“Getting a good teacher” was a major challenge according to one participant in the focus group. Now the greatest challenge is getting teachers to offer high school courses at the school for the Hutterite Colony. Parents of Hutterite don’t want their children to go to the town school “because of all the bad influence.” The Colony expects to have to replace a teacher you might retire within the next three years. Of the two teachers, one is from the local area. The second teacher “came here all the way from Indiana” and is “doing a very good job.” She is in her second year. The Colony also would like to add playground equipment, which will be another challenge.

Solutions

Finding a way to give the teachers a pay raise would be helpful in getting teachers to stay, according to one participant. A board member is working on writing a grant to obtain funding for the playground equipment.

Sustaining the School

The public school serves a special purpose for the Hutterite Colony: “We have our children at home and then they don’t have all that bad influence like a lot of people’s children that live here in town.” Drugs and drinking of alcohol are the characteristics that Hutterite parents want to prevent being exposed to their children. They seek to avoid having their children attend school in places like towns that expose children to the bad influences. This is a major reason to sustain the school, as far as parents in the Hutterite Colony are concerned.

The Future (Next 5 Years)

Technology was the major change perceived in the school over the next five years. “Well it will probably be more computerized. They will probably do more on the computer than they do now. We do have computers in the school. ..But I think five years down the road the school will be totally computerized.” One participant also believed that education would “get harder” in the future for students. Students would be required to have to learn much more, higher standards, to keep up with the changing times. For example, one participant noted: “It will be more into computers. Everything is computers now-a-days, and I think five years down the road it will be even more.” The participant noted that computers were greatly used in managing the hog business of the colony, which has over 3,000 hogs. “That’s takes a lot of feed” and the computers help keep that part of the business managed efficiently and profitably.

One participant explained he wanted his son to get a high school education. “But it is hard. He works in the hog barn. When he comes home he doesn’t want to do his school work. He doesn’t need it he tells me. He is very tired and goes to bed.” The parent notes that getting a high school education only takes four years. “And they need an education. Now they’ve passed a law that you can’t get a license to drive a semi or a driver’s license unless you have a high school education.” The parent thought you could get a driver’s license after a certain age, maybe 18, whether or not you had a high school education.

Supporters Must Do

According to one participant supporter of a small school, the whole Hutterite Colony must see that the children get the right education, that they get good teachers, and that they work with the school board. A participant noted, “The school board has been good to us, a lot better school board here than we had at the place we used to live...They are a lot more friendly, and they are a lot more open to options of what we would like to see and what we would like to have done.” An example noted by a participant was the chairman of the board is the one trying to locate a grant source of funds to obtain the playground equipment and write the grant application. “She worked with another lady on those grants so that we could get the equipment because the school board did not have all the funding needed.”

Other Comments

“Well I’d say our school is pretty decent. Good teachers so far. What I always tell my kids is, if they come home complaining about the teacher, I tell them I know how you are at home and if they have a problem at school I kind of side with the teacher.” When asked if boys are more difficult to motivate to learn compared to the girls, a participant with two daughters noted:

“Well they’re (daughters) still in school. The oldest girl is in grade six. The youngest is a fourth grader. But I think if the boys would go to school instead of have to go out and work at the pig barn and then come home (they would do better). If the boys had the options. Well they have the options, but if they could attend school at least a couple hours a day, it would help greatly. But we don’t have a high school teacher yet to teach them. The work they must do now in high school I could never help them with. When I went through high school it was way different from now.”

Currently, the children would have to go to town to high school, “but that’s not an option. The school is too far away, 50 miles.”

Miles City, MT Session

School Characteristics

Participants emphasized that a small school can be described as a place where everyone knows the children. Country schools are not anonymous to the community. A participant described her school as representative of the community, a close community, and maybe not even like the community in a neighboring town. It has historical significance. “Sometimes those are communities that are no longer around. But the school has stayed and it identifies the community still to this day.” Another participant added that the school pulls that community together regularly through “holidays, spring doings, picnics, things like that. Everybody that comes and lives in the community, knows the children, and sees their progress, their growing up and their learning.”

As one participant noted, “Most of these country schools are where the whole community gets together for whatever reason. It’s the only place to get together, whether it’s dances or Christmas parties.” The school brings the community together and gives the people in the community a reason to come (e.g., Christmas program). It is the center of the social life in the community. The school is open to the public.

One participant described the school he strongly supports this way:

It’s what’s best for the children’s education too. They don’t have to be traveling a long way. They get good attention. They get a good education. They get a lot of one-on-one individual help. And they deserve that. We all pay our taxes and this is one thing that’s really a necessity. It’s important and the kids need it. It’s important to them.

A participant added: “It’s accessible. It’s not accessible to drive 60 miles to the closest town school in a raging blizzard. It’s sometimes not accessible to drive seven miles. I mean it’s not feasible to not have a school in the community where we’re that far from another facility.” This statement inspired another participant to describe the country school this way: “Most of our rural schools I think in our county are off paved roads. There’s not even a paved road to them. The road service is intermittent. It’s gravel. And occasionally if you get too much snow the county snow plow will come out and then the teacher can get to town.” The participant further added: “But once you take the kids out of their community it’s almost like them shipping the Native Americans off to boarding schools. Our kids would actually have to live an hour away from our home, and we have three kids and they’re four years apart. So that’s 12 years, that’s another eight years, that’s 20 years of a split family 9 months out of the a year. And that’s maintaining two separate households which in this economy is not great.”

A husband and wife traveled 120 miles one way to the focus group session. The wife described the school: “It’s a very safe environment. I never worry about my kids. I never worry about drugs, or peer pressure, random shootings, whatever. I have a kindergartner and a sixth grader. And my kindergartner goes to school with fifth, sixth and seventh grades. He absolutely loves school. So I think it’s a safe environment.”

Valued School

A participant noted that the school is valued because of the safe environment explained by the previous participant. The participant further noted that the school is valued because “it’s in our community. And we support our community. We’re involved in our community as much as we possibly can be, given our economy and as hard as we all have to work. Everybody puts down what their doing to try to get to community events at our schools. We all take pride in everybody else’s kids and what they do.”

Another participant seemed to capture much of what other participants in the focus group session expressed.

“The school is an investment of the community. Everybody’s invested in the school. It doesn’t matter whether you have children there or not, you are invested in it. And (the previous person’s) comment about it being safe, I think in these times safety is a huge issue for parents. Does that make it a valuable place? It makes it more than a valuable place, because you’re not going to find many places like it in towns even as small as Billings. And then you start moving up to larger cities and it becomes that much more complex. This is a very simple, safe place and yeah, I think it creates a lot of emotional investment in the students and the children, and that’s huge.”

The country school is valued by many parents in town also. As one participant noted, “But it’s not only valuable to kids it serves, it’s also valuable to some town kids. We do get town kids that come out there. They may be struggling in town, and with the smaller school system those kids have an opportunity of more one-on-one, less peer pressure, less negative things that you find in bigger schools. So they have an opportunity to succeed out there and maybe get on the right track, so when they do go to seventh grade they can go on from there. It just gives them a good start.” In essence, the country school becomes an option that some parents with a child in the nearby town school choose as best for the child.

Another participant looked at things slightly differently, from a business perspective. “I look at this a bit differently. I’m in the position of hiring people, and having that school is a great asset when I’m talking to people because a lot of the people that are looking for ranch jobs have school age children. And I’ve had people turn down a job because they’ve had high school kids that they could not get into town. But we can get the grade school kids to a school.”

Another participant, a cattle rancher, spoke from an economic development standpoint. For the entire community, the entire geographic region, the small school is necessary. “Whether it’s your family on your own place [ranch] or whether it’s hired labor, somebody has to be out there in the hills taking care of the cattle. The fundamental core for our entire economic base for this region is agriculture. I’m not saying there aren’t other components, but agriculture is and will be for the foreseeable future the base or core for it.” The participant noted that it is in everybody’s best interest, including the sale barn and the banks that the ranches and farms are stocked and producing at optimum capacity. Moreover, “To do that takes people. The profit margins we’re working with means we can’t be competitive with what the oil patch is paying [employees], but we can offer lifestyle choices and a good place to raise kids. But to do that requires having a place to get educated without having to drive 60 miles.”

Another participant revealed how valuing the school was exemplified by how repairs to the school are made by community folks, not using taxpayer's dollars. Local people make repairs to plumbing, electrical problems, etc. without cost to the school. Sometimes, even non-local persons are valuable to the school. One participant described how the out-of-state hunters that stayed at his ranch one time were all carpenters, so they spent a couple days at the school putting doors and windows in as a volunteer effort. This was their way of thanking the rancher (and community) for the hunting opportunity.

A participant also explained the school is valued because the teacher is trusted and part of the community. Because the school is so isolated from other communities, the teacher(s) generally live on site at least, if not permanently at least during the school year, or during the school week. "So they become part of the community....and to have a teacher who is part of the community, I think that is also what makes it so safe. They know that people are there to support them but they also know that they are part of the community and we trust each other."

"That sense of community, the people cooperating and repairing our schools and taking care of our teachers housing, I think it sets a good example and role model for our children. They're learning from us because we're living it. And we get that through our community schools."

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

One participant noted the biggest challenge is the rumor that "they're working on legislation to close country schools or something. I guess that would be the biggest concern I can see in the near future." Another participant indicated that school staffing is always a concern because the community doesn't have a lot of other things to offer. "It's hard to get teachers to come out and want to stay there because we can't offer the city life." Adding to the teacher staffing issue, a participant noted the challenge would be getting a teacher to stay at a school where there's no guarantee of future employment. "There's not a guarantee in any teaching job, but a guarantee and security for more than one year of employment. After the end of this school year, is that teacher going to have to go back out into the workforce and try to find another job?"

It also is a challenge addressing the consistently changing school population. As one participant explained, "Our district has two schools in it. One is closed and one is not. And they are about ten miles apart but the people they reach are much further. So we have to decide which school to keep open and which school to close. And it completely depends on which kids are school-age, and then when they hit high school the whole family goes to town. So you might have 12 kids one year and three the next. So it's really hard to meet it."

Another participant explained the dilemma this way in an aging agricultural area: "You can't hire good people if you don't have a good school to offer, and you can't keep a good school open if you can't hire the people."

Solutions

Various solutions were state by focus group participants. One participant suggested the solution is to "haul the politicians out to all the small country schools to learn about the schools, but especially to travel on the bad roads." One participant noted it is a wonder more parents don't simply home school their children, "with the roads and the weather being bad in this state."

One participant noted that the federal rural assistance funds for education had been very useful, especially in acquiring technology for the school. “We can offer all kinds of technology to our kids that come from those specific funds. That has just been a godsend because the technology can really improve the children’s education, despite the fact that they’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Another participant pointed out the reality of having a stronger voice for the small country school.

“Our elected representatives are the ones that can help us in the outback more than anybody and we need to get to them a little bit more. Maybe we need to get a little bit tougher by starting to back up our requests with how we vote if they can’t help us.” The participant further noted that “We need to get to the people that don’t understand our way of life out here. It seems to me that the people in the consolidation movement, if that is that the right word, are from more populated areas and they are looking for something to benefit them at great harm to a lot of people who support this state in agriculture. We need to be able to get to them and the way to do that is through many avenues but the main way to start and to get their attention is through our elected representatives. They need to be speaking louder for us.” A participant added: “That starts with electing the right people to go to Helena (state capitol) as our representatives.”

Sustaining the School

A participant with two boys, one in kindergarten and one in second grade, noted that if the school was not sustained she would have to take them to drive back and forth every day 120 miles round trip, travel 600 miles a week, about 10 hours a week just to get to and from school. “And that would not be on a bus situation. That would be one person physically taking them. It would be much longer if they were actually stopping and picking up kids. It may probably be more expensive to run a bus than run the school.”

Another participant added it would not be much fun. It also leaves little time for family, except work. “When I was in high school I had to ride that bus and it wasn’t fun. We had to get up in the morning before daylight and do our chores in the dark and come home in the dark and get off the bus and do our chores. We didn’t have a lot of time for family or any other thing when we got to high school.” The participant further noted, “I can’t imagine sending a kindergartner that far and that many hours. It really wouldn’t be very fun for them. The education they’d be getting, it makes you wonder if it would be worth it.”

Most comments expressed this same sentiment for raising fund and community support to sustain the school. It is a lifestyle choice for the family in an agricultural area. One participant expressed the situation compared to non-agricultural families: “We are in agriculture and we are agriculture professionals. We deserve the same rights and responsibilities as any professional living in town for a quality education for their child. They like to live where their kid can go to school close to home. It’s no different for us.”

“So basically the school has been sustained to maintain the economic viability of the community. People want to live on the land. That’s the best way to care for your business which is depending on the land. You can be there to care for animals; you can be there for any issues that arise. And you can maintain the community which is an economic community as well as a social community, as well as an educational community. Just like any place, any city, any town, any rural community, the school is just part of the whole fabric.”

The Future (Next 5 Years)

Some participants predicted that in the next five years the enrollment would likely increase in the small country school. But that was not a certainty. Some participants explained that hiring a new teacher would occur in the next five years. Some hoped the school would get needed repairs like a new roof, or new textbooks for the children. Technology would be added to the school to meet student needs, with some participants believing that technology would make school easier for the kids. One participant noted that the addition of technology for a new generation of students will actually make the school more viable, more flexible, and more financially feasible. Most participants emphasized that “small” does not make the school deficient in educating children. This is a stereotype that needs to be corrected.

Supporters Must Do

Many participants emphasized that it was important for their political representation to promote the fiscal responsibility that the communities put into these schools. As one participant noted, “Everybody must contribute what they have to offer, whether its time, labor, whatever. If those sacrifices aren’t made, then these schools aren’t going to stay open. And how many school boards of larger schools or how many parents, how many teachers have that degree of accountability when it comes to whether or not their school remains open.”

Several participants explained how important it was to begin to better communicate with persons and groups that need to know about the small country schools. One participant noted, “We need to start sending out invitations to our Christmas programs and to our spring picnics to these people and ask them to please come and see. We get state money. We have to get funding from somewhere. Why don’t they come and see how we’re spending our money. And let them judge for themselves how productive it is to have rural schools in our communities.” Some participants noted it will be difficult to change the stereotypes about the small school, but it is essential to sustaining the school in the isolated rural areas.

“And it’s hard for us to get heard because we are so low in numbers. I think sometimes they discount us. But also, like you said earlier, they don’t even know we exist. I know we’ve advertised for teachers on a few national networks, and they’re like are you kidding me? Are there still one-room schools left? Are you serious? This isn’t a joke? No, it isn’t a joke. We do have electricity, telephones, satellite and internet, and indoor plumbing.”

A participant expressed the need to have factual information, like is being produced from this focus group meeting. The participant explained: “I think the collection of data is a really good thing because when you go to your legislators or your lobbyists they need numbers. They need facts. They need very, very down to earth information. They need how many miles it would take to get your kid to school if your school closed. They need how many hours that would put the child on the bus. They need to know how many dollars they would end up paying in transportation contracts to get the child to and from school.” As one participant noted, “I don’t really think if they put all the numbers together that they have any idea what they’re talking about when they suggest closing a school to save money.”

Other Comments

Several additional comments were offered, as follows (quotes):

- If you look at these rural schools, you start tallying up the hours and mileage and then ask what if the parent has to take them to a town school. What does that do to your family? Most of these ranching communities require both mom and dad working. Mom doesn't sit in the house. Financially, it's not feasible to keep a family together agriculturally and run the ranch if one parent is taking the kids to school and it's not fair to the kids to sit them on a bus for anywhere from 50-90 miles a day. I want to know what happens when the blizzards come and the kids are 60 miles from home. Who's bringing them home or who's babysitting?
- I think kind of what everybody's pointing out here is that ranching is our lifestyle. We're at home. It takes all of us to make a living ranching. The women work as well as the men. I know those two both work hard all day long. The only reason I know that is I'm out on the road working too and I see them. We're all doing it. We all have things to do. But what's really important here is that our kids being close to home going to school see us doing that. If they're boarded in town or if Mom packs them up and moves to town five days a week they're missing out on a huge important part of agricultural life. They deserve the right to have everything we had and grow up in it and come back to the ranch. That's why you guys (other focus group participants) are there. It is. Kids that go to town and stay in town don't come back to the ranch and live there. They don't. In agriculture that's what we need. We need ranchers to stay on the ranch.
- I used to work in a larger school system in the high school, and when the rural kids come into the high school they have more values, they're more polite, and they know where their life is going. They have good work ethics and they're respectful. I'm not saying living in town is bad either. But the kids are different.
- A lot of town kids are going to other country schools because they get a little behind and they get them caught back up. We've had that out there. And I've seen a lot of the kids that got started in one of these country schools go to a big school and the first thing they want to do is up them a grade or two because they're so far ahead of kids in the town schools.

Billings, MT Session

School Characteristics

A participant described the K-6 school as a place where most of the students have gone on to high school, received honors, gone on to college, and now are in business for themselves or doing other successful things. "There is a very small percentage that are just, I'd say, average." The school enrolls five students. "When I went to school there we were in the 20s and I had six kids in my class. But all of the kids that have come out of there have done real well everywhere they went." The participant explained that the reason was because of the teachers and parents. "The teachers really care about what they're doing and I think a lot of it is the one-on-one. Making sure that the kids get it, what they're trying to teach them. And not just running over the top of it and on to the next thing."

Another participant agreed and indicated seeing the same result in the school serving the logging camps. “I’ve seen it in the logging camps too where they had their country schools. You don’t have the peer pressure that’s in your bigger schools. These kids all get along pretty good. They’ve basically grown up together, most of them. You don’t have much trouble with the peer pressure and the bullying. The teacher can keep a closer eye on things because of the environment that they’re in. And if they do get in trouble there the parent is going to come to the school. The teacher is not afraid to call the parent like they do in a lot of your bigger schools where you have that problem.”

A participant emphasized that the teachers and parents work together. “Yeah and they work hand in hand with the kids. When we had our five-year plan meeting up there the other day, the community was invited and you would be surprised at the turnout we had of people that haven’t had kids in the school for 20 years. But they’re still interested in keeping that school going, keeping it alive because of what it has done for the community, the quality of children that have come out of there and what they’ve done with their lives. One guy who was 87 years old came. He went to school there. A few years ago he and two other guys helped build the school gymnasium by moving a couple old buildings together.”

Valued School

A participant explained people value the building highly, most in the community went to the school as kids. “If they were to force them to shut down it would be like cutting off their right arm, taking something away from them.” The participant noted there might be a couple of people in the area that don’t value the school because they think it is a waste of money, “that the kids could go somewhere else to school... because the bus comes there to pick up the high school kids, why can’t all the kids ride the bus?”

Another participant noted how “The last time when they needed money they went and called the community together and just showed what would happen if the school does close and the kids go into another school district. What happens with their taxes, they will go up three or four times. It was pretty easy for people to say keep it going.”

One participant noted: “My part on the school board is to kind of make sure the maintenance is kept up on the school. We know probably, eventually we’re going to lose the school. But we want the building to be kept nice so it can be of value to somebody or to the community, rather than just let it run down and pretty soon the windows are knocked out, the doors are flapping, and it falls down.” The participant took pride in noting how people planted a natural snow fence along the driveway of the school and added an underground sprinkler system to that little snow fence. The school also has a new septic tank and the drain field was fixed.

Greatest Challenge Next 3 Years

Major challenges for the school according to one participant will be the declining enrollment and the need to hire a new teacher when the current teacher retires. The teacher is from the area, lives on a ranch and has taught for almost 30 years. One participant explained that the enrollment is decreasing partly because of technology advances on the ranches and fewer people are being hired to do the work. Also, when the railroad pulled out, several businesses that relied on the railroad closed. Families with kids moved away.

The community has pretty much converted back to almost totally agricultural. A few people are coming back after they retire. The community hopes to keep the school open. But if it must close, plans are to maybe use the building for a community center and also a fire hall. The school sits in the middle of five acres.

Solutions

Finding a solution to the declining enrollment problem is difficult. It might be possible that some students from nearby towns could come to the school. But a participant noted that if the children are in high school their younger siblings tend to get on the bus with them and go to the town school. “Otherwise, this year our enrollment would be double to what it is.”

One participant explained that the schools enrollment is sometimes influenced by sports. Two schools might work together to have a football team, or a school with a team draws students away from a school. The school now plays 8-man football and may go to 6-man with the declining enrollment. The school has about 96 students in grades 8-12.

A participant also explained that part of the issue is simply the changing times regarding family size. “Families with children are smaller today, with only one or two children compared to four or five or more in the past generations.”

Sustaining the School

People value the school for the music program. A participant noted, “We turn out some pretty good little musicians out of there. Kids play two or three instruments each.” The community also values the Christmas program and other events at the school. “You are expected to go to them, and most all people do. “I got chewed out today at the grocery store because I didn’t go to the Easter program they had yesterday. I had to go to Billings yesterday to get my teeth fixed.”

A participant explained that “If they were to shut that school down and it decreases the chance of some industry coming. People are going to say I can’t move a family there, there’s no school.”

The Future (Next 5 Years)

The major change participant expect at the school is the change in teacher, as the current teacher retires. Most participants don’t think the physical features of the building will change much. One participant indicated that a change also, which had begun, is “they want younger children to start learning harder stuff.” Standards are increasing, as citizens realize what they learned in an upper grade is now expected to be learned in a lower grade. Participants also see the value of computers in the future in helping students learn. This will be a change also, particularly with the hiring of a new teacher who will replace the retiring teacher who has limited skills in using technology.

“Everything is down to little buttons and monitors. And a small school like that with all of this video conferencing and that kind of stuff can really take advantage. We might have a sixth grader that’s going to be taking a course from New York on something where that’s a heck of an opportunity for him. And so I think that’s really going to be one thing that changes...we already have the video cameras on the computers at the school for students. Each student has a computer. ”

Supporters Must Do

The participants generally see the community commitment for the school remaining high. The music teacher that comes from a neighboring town will continue to offer lessons at the school ...“until she can’t drive

anymore.” Retired teachers now serve as aides for students and will continue doing so. It keeps them involved with kids, “gives them something to do in retirement.” The school board clerk helps teach computer skills to the students.

In terms of political supporters, the participants were unsure how the politicians viewed the school. Most had no previous contact with politicians. One noted, “I talk occasionally with my representative but it’s always agricultural issues that I discuss with him.” One participant emphasized, “I guess I can’t believe they (politicians) wouldn’t be supportive of the school.” But another participant explained that money related decisions by politicians could be critical: “Well I ran across some folks up there in that school district (neighboring town) that wouldn’t mind if they shut our school down. They would get our money. Their taxes would go down and ours would go up.”

Other Comments

Additional comments offered by focus group participants included:

- The thing I like about these small schools is I can’t remember any kid that has gone down the bad road, really. There might be one or two that had a little drinking problem or something, but as far as being a good citizen, they’re not incarcerated or anything like that. I’m 70 years old, and I’ve been around small schools pretty much all my life.
- The parents know who the teacher is and the teacher knows who the parents are. It is just that connection that makes a difference and the one-on-one attention to kid’s needs.
- I think about the peer pressure thing. You know, I don’t even remember what peer pressure was when I went to school, or even when my kids were in school. I raised six kids. Maybe they were bullied. But the kids in the school were not those kinds of kids. Besides, they wouldn’t have gotten away with that. But now this peer pressure scares me. It really does.
- Moms don’t just work on the ranch. We’ve got the soccer mom syndrome. I mean kids still need to go someplace when they’re involved in the sports. The mothers are really involved in that. Between my son and two other ones, he’s sixth grade and the other two are fifth graders, we three parents got together, as each night somebody took them in and brought them home from practice. And we all just take turns to get it done for two months.

Conclusions

Based on the findings from the analysis of survey and focus group sessions, several conclusions are drawn for this study of frontier school districts in Montana.

1. K-8 elementary school districts comprise the vast majority of “Frontier Schools” in Montana.
2. Generally, teacher turnover is high in the frontier school districts with the majority of teachers having less than five years of experience in the district.
3. A Bachelor’s degree is the highest level of educational attainment for the majority of teachers in frontier school districts.

4. Montana institutions of higher education produce the vast majority of educators who work in frontier school districts.

5. Generally, the vast majority of board chairs in frontier school districts have served four to ten years on the board of education, with about half of board chairs serving as chair of the board of education between one and three years.

6. Frontier school districts have small student enrollments, with more than half enrolling less than 30 students.

7. Frontier school districts may include a substantial portion of impoverished students, with more than four in ten districts comprised of more than 40 percent of students eligible for the free and reduced price lunch program.

8. Agriculture is the most prevalent economic base in the vast majority of frontier school districts.

9. Top five major challenges (most pressing issues) in frontier school districts are low student enrollment, unrealistic federal regulations, inadequate financial resources, mixed grade levels of students in classroom, and difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s).

10. Few frontier schools, comprised primarily of K-8 elementary school districts, have major challenges related to illegal drugs, meeting teacher certification requirements, student use of alcohol, inadequate distance learning technology (e.g., Internet connectivity), inadequate curriculum/course offerings, and inadequate number of support staff.

11. Frontier school districts explain low student enrollment as a trend with major consequences. Their concerns are expressed in statements such as: "Enrollment has dropped over the years." "As students graduate, we only have one (student) or so trickling in--so enrollment is dropping." "If enrollment becomes too low will good teachers be laid off? Eventually will the school be closed?" "Low student enrollment leads to low funding and threat of consolidation/closure." "Our enrollment has been dropping these past few years, and this year we lose our largest number when the 8th grade graduates. We have few children coming up--only one pre-school and no kindergarten. We have to cut back on staff."

12. Frontier school districts face "inadequate financial resources" with enormous impact on students and teachers, expressed in statements such as: "I would like to see more equipment, more field trips, and more resources for our students. Pay for teachers so they can stay would help." "Our school (like many rural schools) is constantly struggling financially, which leads to higher teacher turnover rates (teachers leave for better pay)." "The school needs to update/fix physical issues at the school but cannot fund them." "We never have enough money to provide the proper education materials." "Teacher pay is really low but schools can't squeeze anymore pennies for them." "Money is based on ANB[student enrollment] and land taxes."

13. "Mixed grade levels of students in the classroom" presents frontier school districts with special issues, as illustrated in the following statements: "Federal requirements are not specifically applicable to my student population from year to year." "Teachers and staff expected to "know it all" by counselors, nurses, etc." "With the funding being so low, we can't keep up with changes in textbooks for grades. We haven't the money to buy updates and new technology."

14. “Unrealistic federal expectations” is a major issue in frontier school districts, as illustrated by the following statements: “Can’t spend the money where we need to.” “Our school lost our title program because of the last Census; the mine that supports our community is closing its doors.” “Our school’s members are getting smaller, students are going to neighboring schools earlier and that larger school is trying to consolidate.” “A neighboring district is eager for our enrollment numbers. There is pressure to consolidate from outside the community.”

15. Frontier school districts operate mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms and use school facilities to serve critical community functions as key general practices that contribute to school sustainability.

16. Staffing practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability include making special in-service opportunities available for teachers, creating partnerships with other districts, employing teacher(s) with multiple endorsements, passing local levy, and promoting reputation of the school.

17. Fiscal practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability include seeking bids and comparison pricing for all purchases, forming a consortium of school districts to leverage resources, cooperating with other districts for specialized personnel, increasing student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten), and hiring teachers on low end of district pay scale.

18. Distance learning technology practices of frontier schools that contribute to school sustainability primarily include delivering professional development opportunities for teachers and provided enrichment experiences for students.

19. Importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth is the primary reason that has been the most important consideration for sustaining the small rural public school(s) in the frontier school districts. However, school board chairs and community supporters of the schools also consider meeting community development functions and needs somewhat more important as a consideration in sustaining the school compared to school district personnel.

20. Community supporters of the small frontier school particularly consider the small school as highly effective in educating students because it enables teachers to provide students with one-on-one attention and because it makes possible a close, supportive relationship between parents and teachers where everyone knows each other, including students.

21. Community supporters of the small frontier school view the school as an essential family support structure for choosing the way of life associated with working as ranchers and farmers in isolated areas of Montana.

22. Community supporters of the small frontier school perceive the need to increase factual communications about the productivity of the small school to the broader general public, including providing politicians with facts about the school and its value to the community.

In summary, small rural schools on the Montana “frontier” have numerous challenges. Most of the challenges are unique to the agricultural way of life that has prevailed since establishment of the West. These small schools also are achieving exceptional success that is benefiting students, schools and their communities. This research allowed the Montana Small Schools Alliance to gather valuable evidence of the challenges and practices, which will provide direction for future work of the Alliance in supporting the frontier schools of Montana.

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