



Building Rural District Capacity for Turnaround

from *The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices*

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About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

Building Rural District Capacity for Turnaround

Sam Redding and Herbert J. Walberg

Rural schools generally hold their own compared with urban and suburban schools when it comes to student achievement. However, when a rural school persistently underachieves, turning it around presents challenges unlike those in more populated settings. Especially, rural schools tend to be situated within small, rural districts with lean central office staff, geographic separation from external resources, and limited capacity for the heavy lifting of school turnaround.

The Center on School Turnaround (CST) administered a questionnaire on what senior state education agency (SEA) staff from 13 states observed about the implementation of turnaround strategies in rural SEAs.¹ An analysis of the questionnaire responses and the literature on rural schools shows that many of the problems rural educators face overlap considerably with those of urban and suburban educators, but some of their problems are distinctive and even unique. This chapter considers the strengths and unique challenges of rural local education agencies (LEAs) and schools and focuses on solutions for those identified to be turned around. The recommendations for the SEA address rural LEAs' perceived disadvantages and leverage the advantages of rural settings.

Background

This chapter draws on the previous review of the characteristics and optimal procedures and policies for improving rural schools (Redding & Walberg,

¹Unpublished research of Redding, S. (2013, January): *Turnaround in Rural LEAs and Schools*. To protect their privacy, neither the names of the staff nor the states are disclosed here since their responses to questions were given with an understanding of confidentiality. Their answers, moreover, should not be construed as official SEA policies.

2012) and the responses to the CST's recent questionnaire administered to SEA officials. The Redding and Walberg review pointed out that before 1900, most American students went to small schools in small school districts in small, rural communities. Over recent decades, however, both schools and districts grew dramatically in size.

Districts merged and consolidated to grow in size as they decreased in number, from about 115,000 school districts at one time, many responsible for a single, sometimes one-room school a century and more ago, to about 15,000 districts today. In the half-century from 1940 to 1990, the size of the average U.S. school district rose from 217 to 2,637 students—a factor of more than 10—and the size of the average school rose from 127 to 653 (Walberg & Walberg, 1994). In the last two decades, districts (including those in rural areas and not including charter districts) grew smaller in number and larger in enrollment.

Strengths of Rural Communities

The fact that students in rural schools, across the board, achieve as well as their counterparts in suburban and urban areas attests to assets of rural communities that may be leveraged in school turnarounds. Among other studies of the impact of school district size on achievement, Walberg and Fowler (1987) analyzed the relationship between average test scores of third, sixth, and ninth graders in all New Jersey rural, suburban, and urban districts. Controlling for district socioeconomic status (SES) and taking per-student expenditures into account, the smaller the district, the higher the achievement. It is certainly true that small districts exist in urban and suburban areas and that some rural districts are large. This chapter's focus on the capacity of rural districts to manage school turnaround will assume that low-capacity rural districts are typically small.

What leads to generally higher achievement of smaller districts at reasonable cost? Close oversight of the school by a school board with strong commitment to the community can be an advantage. Although close community ties can also undermine a school board's impetus to make necessary changes in personnel who might be kin or close neighbors, school boards in small districts benefit from familiarity with the internal operations of their schools and the people who staff them.

The "social capital" inherent to communities in which people live in close proximity, bound by multiple relationships, and with personal connections to one another and each other's children is of immeasurable value. In a study of high-performing, high-needs rural schools, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that supportive relationships with families were strongly associated with the success of rural schools. Teachers in rural schools exhibit an impressively high concern for their students' lives beyond the classroom and accept responsibility for supporting their students' social and behavioral needs (Roeser & Midgley, 1997).

In all rural schools, moreover, certain characteristics may accrue positively to student motivation to learn and to their levels of achievement. Witte and Sheridan (2011) write:

Because of their centrality within the community, rural schools routinely connect with families in multiple capacities as part of typical daily routines. Rural schools provide opportunities for community communication and participation. In many rural communities, the local school building is a point of pride for the community and houses sporting and cultural events, civic activities, and shelter during severe weather. Teachers serve as coaches and club sponsors, which means that they have frequent and varied contact with students at multiple age and academic levels and with their families. Administrators are often highly accessible, active members of the community, allowing them to connect with families in a variety of ways. (p. 153)

Although the opportunity for frequent contact among school personnel and students' families may be significant in rural communities, the quality of the interaction cannot be taken for granted. School personnel must intentionally take advantage of their interactions with families and community members to influence prevailing attitudes and behaviors that impact student learning.

Obstacles to School Turnaround in Rural LEAs and Schools

Some rural communities and schools may present unique challenges for educators, particularly when the district is small (low capacity to manage turnaround), remote (distant from support services), and serving a high-poverty population. Poverty rates are rising in some rural schools (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008), and their communities suffer from a paucity of social and behavioral services for families (DeLeon, Wakefield, & Hagglund, 2003). Rural schools may experience high teacher turnover, with their teaching staff consisting of a disproportionate number of newly credentialed teachers who replace the teachers who leave (Monk, 2007). The pattern of school closures and district and school consolidation has disrupted many small communities and distanced families from their children's schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Limited resources require schools to do more with less (Monk, 2007).

Though the centrality of the school to rural community life may be an asset, it also places added demands on educators to serve functions beyond that of their primary purpose of education (National Education Association, 2008). Parents in rural schools attend school events more often than in urban and suburban communities, but they also talk less often with their children about school programs and interact less frequently with teachers than parents in other settings (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997). In closely knit rural communities, a distrust of "outsiders" often places barriers to collaboration between new school personnel and families (Owens, Richerson, Murphy, Jagelewski, & Rossi, 2007). This tendency

may be further aggravated by the high teacher turnover and some teachers' desire to live outside the community and commute to work.

Successful school turnaround seldom occurs due to the school's own change in direction without external pressure and support. The LEA is the likely channel for pressure and conduit for support, but the capacity of small, rural LEAs to manage the turnaround of its schools is limited by the size and narrow span of expertise of the central office and the distance from service providers. Studies of rural turnaround and the insights of SEA respondents to the Center on School Turnaround's questionnaire cite additional obstacles to school turnaround in rural districts.

Student Motivation to Learn in Rural Schools

Employment in rural areas has traditionally been linked to agriculture, and farm-related jobs did not require post secondary education. This has certainly changed over the years, as agribusiness has increasingly demanded a skilled and educated workforce. But community attitudes toward education sometimes lag behind the requirements of the workplace. Perhaps as a consequence of the depopulation in rural areas, rural educators often attest to a dampening effect on student aspirations where families do not see education as an essential vehicle to advancement in life, and the improved life chances an education provides require relocation away from a shrinking rural community. Many of the issues they face also confront urban and suburban educators, and rural communities offer several distinctive educational advantages. Low student motivation to learn is a problem often cited by rural educators, although the research does not clearly substantiate that this problem is greater in rural schools than in nonrural schools (Yang & Fetsch, 2007). Rather, it seems a widespread problem in most of the nation's schools—rural, urban, and suburban (Christensen & Horn, 2008).

Motivation to learn is typically defined as the interaction between the student's value for the learning task and the student's perception of self-efficacy in mastering the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Although Yang and Fetch (2007) found the perception of self-efficacy among rural students to be no less substantial than that of nonrural students, other studies indicate that rural students are inordinately inclined to not value the learning goals of their schools (Hardre, Crowson, DeBacker, & White, 2007). For rural students inhibited by a "low horizon" mindset, the educational remedies are similar as those for students in other settings. The centrality of the school to rural community life, however, places a greater responsibility on the rural school to elevate students' aspirations. Likewise, the avenues to higher academic achievement are largely the same in rural as in urban and suburban schools.

A few respondents to the SEA questionnaire shifted the "low horizon" problem from the students to the community and the school personnel. One respondent stated simply that there is a "lack of urgency about 'why our kids need to

be prepared for college.” Another noted: “Many of the community members had a ‘small town’ mentality that they didn’t think their school could be on a list for Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools.” In the opinion of a third respondent, in many rural areas there is a deficiency in the “community appreciation of the value of an education.”

Professional Practice in Rural Schools

With little district capacity to support its schools’ improvement efforts and few education service providers, including SEAs nearby, the rural school may rely more heavily on its own resources and ingenuity to drive its improvement than elsewhere. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it requires teaming, defined purposes, ample planning, and disciplined work. Schools improve when professional practice improves, and good leadership and teaching practices are not different in rural than in nonrural schools.

When the remoteness of a rural community is a barrier to attracting and retaining educational leaders and teachers, the school’s internal systems for ensuring consistent application of effective practice is paramount. The policies, programs, procedures, and practices must be engrained in the daily operations of the school in ways that optimize the productivity of current staff and readily assimilate new staff.

Lean and Low-Capacity LEAs and Schools

The process of recruiting, hiring, placing, evaluating, and supporting the improvement of school staff is typically a chief responsibility of the LEA. In rural LEAs, however, the central office itself is small and lacking in expertise for personnel management. “Rural LEAs often have smaller central office structures, with fewer leaders overseeing multiple programs. In some cases, the individual had the experience and capacity to manage the implementation of a School Improvement Grant (SIG) locally, but in many, SIG proved to be an overwhelming task initially,” is how one questionnaire respondent explained the problem. Another state official explained how a lack of specialized skills impacts rural schools:

Rural schools may not have curriculum directors, data specialists, assessment coordinators, subject-specific instructional coaches, or assistant principals. These roles either go unmet or fall to the person whose assignment most closely aligns. Or, it all falls to the principal, who is soon overwhelmed and cannot focus on the classroom instruction. That is where the SIG grant helps level the playing field a bit, allowing these schools to fund these positions for at least the duration of the grant and gives them a chance to think about how to sustain them after the grant funding ends. Some of these roles are just not filled.

Evaluation of SIG in rural schools and follow-up studies that track the sustainability of gains when resources are reduced will shed light on the impact

specialized personnel have on a turnaround and the ability of schools to retain such personnel or perpetuate their influences beyond the SIG grant period.

Human Capital in Rural Schools

Asked to name the biggest challenges facing turnaround efforts in rural schools, the SEA respondents to the questionnaire overwhelmingly cited matters of human capital. Recruiting, retaining, evaluating, and elevating the performance of leaders and teachers proves especially problematic in rural LEAs and particularly so in remote areas. One state official expressed concern about the requirements in the federal SIG program to replace principals and, in some models, a majority of school staff:

The SIG requirement to replace the principal was very damaging to the process of building trust and partnership between the SEA and the LEAs and ignored rural challenges to recruit and retain quality, committed staff. There has been teacher and staff turnover that has occurred over time, with more strategy and intention than outlined by SIG requirements. Hiring and retaining high-quality staff and teachers continues to be a challenge with rural school environments. At the same time, maintaining support for and shared ownership of the SIG process has been difficult to establish and maintain with some school staff. Some staff and teachers have not been receptive to professional development or new instructional opportunities, hampering the progress of the effort.

This state official succinctly states the human capital problem that other officials named in pointing to challenges encountered in rural school turnaround. Another official in a largely rural, Western state, elaborated on this theme.

Rural LEAs struggle with human capital issues in ways that seem to differ substantially from urban locations. Rural LEAs are often situated much farther away from universities and metropolitan areas from which they can recruit new and effective personnel. Therefore, they often find themselves in a situation in which they must strategically develop the human capital that they already have, when possible, and only let go of those who are the most difficult to improve. It makes the SIG turnaround model a very unlikely option in rural settings.

An additional element of human capital management in rural settings is the organizational structure. Though SIG expects collaboration among teachers for data analysis, many rural schools are very small. Many only have one teacher per grade level. This makes organizational change in the system very difficult. As an example, in a larger school, it is easier to develop structures and schedules that capitalize on the assets of the “many” in order to provide collaboration time for the “few” (e.g., scheduling PE and pull-out classes so multiple teachers can have a common collaboration time). This economy of scale is more difficult with small workforces.

“The pool of applicants for both leadership and teaching positions is significantly smaller in rural areas,” a state official noted. For younger and older potential recruits at all levels, rural areas may be perceived to lack the economic and cultural advantages of cities and suburbs including, for example, shopping malls or religious and other social organizations (American Institutes for Research, 2012).

Human Capital in Rural LEAs

The LEA staff is usually smaller in rural school districts, but their responsibilities are just as important as those in cities that can afford large numbers of specialized staff, for example, those in several kinds of special education and second-language learning. Dedicated specialists may be reluctant to carry out responsibilities beyond their ken and even to work in the absence of colleagues in their own specialty.

An additional human capital issue in rural districts is related to community dynamics. In an urban setting, people are often “anonymous” in relation to their local school. However, in rural communities, everybody knows everyone...and their business. The school board chair may be married to or the cousin of or the brother-in-law of the worst teacher in the district. The principal may also be the elder at the local church. In other words, influence can be unduly disseminated because of the social structures, making the organizational politics of rural districts more challenging than in some of their urban counterparts. Thus the problem of human capital is deeper than the paucity of candidates for recruitment. The nature of rural communities, itself, complicates personnel decisions. As one SEA official observed: “Changing the culture of the school is harder because staff members are alumni or other long-term residents who don’t always have a broader vision of what K–12 education can/should provide.”

Access to Technical Assistance and Professional Development

Rural LEAs are usually far from key resources such as technical assistance easily accessed by urban schools. Service providers may have to drive for several hours to reach rural schools, which makes their recruitment difficult and may add to service costs. Being smaller, moreover, rural LEAs and schools have smaller budgets from federal and state sources to purchase services. Thus, rural educators may face higher costs and fewer services. Rural education leaders cannot easily send staff to urban centers since substantial transportation and ground costs may be incurred, and substitute pools are likely to be smaller in their communities.

One SEA respondent noted: “In rural LEAs, there are fewer opportunities for professional development. Due to multiple job-related assignments, the district/school may not have internal specialists to provide ongoing PD. In addition, these schools must travel longer distances to participate in PD when available in the state or region. Smaller budgets and juggling the LEA needs among a small staff

makes it difficult to find substitutes and/or release staff to attend off-site PD.” Another respondent emphasized the paucity of time available for instructional improvement: “With a small amount of staff in some of the rural schools, it is hard to find the time to meet and work on strategies/interventions when one teacher wears many hats.”

Overcoming the Obstacles

The obstacles to school turnaround faced by rural LEAs are largely those of human capital, which includes recruitment and retention of quality staff, access to resources for professional development, lack of specialized staff, and limitations in exposing students to a rich curriculum, expertly provided.

Staff Recruitment and Retention

SEAs can be helpful in solving these problems by allocating special resources, staff, and time. SEA staff can inform LEA and school staff about solutions that have worked well in rural schools. Young, idealistic Teach for America teachers, for example, have been helpful as beginning teachers with special assistance from school, district, and state professionals, as well as serving as co-teachers with successful teachers before assuming their full responsibilities similar to those of conventionally trained teachers.

Similar examples for an SEA role in recruiting leaders and teachers for rural and other hard-to-staff schools have also proven worthwhile. Some rural recruiters travel to college job fairs and inform potential recruits that they will themselves be taught and given experiences to begin a highly successful professional career. Their recruitment conversation makes clear what the LEA can do for the new teacher and vice versa. Even though they may not keep beginners long, they seek the best beginners with positive attitudes toward school turnaround. An SEA questionnaire respondent put it this way:

Many of our rural LEAs have employed “Teach for America (TfA)” teachers. These teachers have proven to be very effective in a number of our settings. Realizing the time limitation around TfA, our LEAs have been encouraged to engage in team teaching, allowing for a new teacher to teach alongside a TfA teacher, work collaboratively, and prepare to “take over.”

One of our rural LEAs travels to job fairs at colleges that are out of state and has developed a recruitment approach that says they will teach new teachers how to be really good. They make it about what the LEA can do for the new teacher and vice versa. They know they won’t be able to keep the teachers long, so they plan for it and just expect to try and get new, young teachers fresh out of college who have a can-do attitude.

Also, successful rural LEAs have district and school leaders who work strategically with the board of trustees to ensure community politics don’t interfere with school improvement. For example, they report regularly on progress and success to keep the conversations oriented toward the right things.

An environment of success and collaboration is attractive to potential recruits. “The environment of success that one of our districts has achieved in a small rural town in the delta has caused a ‘line-up’ of teachers wanting to now teach in that district when they used to not be able to find enough teachers,” a state official observed.

SEAs can encourage district boards and central office leaders to discourage community politics that interfere with staff recruitment and replacement necessary for school turnaround. Montana (see next chapter) intentionally included school board development in its SIG and related school turnaround programs.

Differential pay regimes enable rural districts to attract candidates for hard-to-fill positions. “Some schools have had to offer a stipend or additional pay to get the appropriate staffing,” a state official offered. Another state official explained the state’s role in salary differentiation: “We conducted a statewide salary study that recommended efforts to shift funding structures statewide to support a differentiated scale to support recruitment and retention.” One state official stated: “We encourage rural districts to provide bonuses for hard-to-find certification area teachers.” Other questionnaire respondents noted that SIG funds were used to incentivize employment, reward staff who increase achievement, and contract with Teach for America and The New Teacher Project—a nonprofit organization established in 1997 to place effective teachers in schools with poor and minority students.

One state official reported on the state’s incentive program to repay teachers’ student loans and pay moving expenses when they took positions in hard-to-staff districts. Rural districts are among the most obvious recipients of this benefit.

Careful assignment of staff to optimize the available pool of talent is also important. “A lot of time it is shifting current staff around to make the teacher work at his or her best ability and strengths,” a questionnaire respondent noted.

Expanding the pool of available school leaders through regional Leadership Academies is how one state increases the likelihood that rural districts can select leaders prepared for the work:

These programs were approved to offer professional development and alternative administrative licensure to aspiring principals who will lead low-performing and high-needs schools. Participants meet weekly to learn from each other and focus on a case-study curriculum. These principals-to-be also get hands-on learning as they complete a full-time, year-long clinical residency experience in an area school. Thanks to special partnerships among participating school districts, community colleges, and universities, many of these aspiring principals can earn credit toward a Masters in School Administration when they complete this program.

One state official explained the combination of SEA efforts to expand the talent pool and incentivize employment in rural districts. “The SEA has developed programs to license nontraditional teachers and to encourage the use of

Teach for America. The SEA and LEAs are also providing financial incentives to master principals to relocate into rural areas.”

Finally, states are assisting LEAs with the hiring process. One respondent noted that the SEA provided “organized materials for principal hiring including a job posting, principal competency resources, and interview questions/process. These are available electronically by email or flash drive.” The salient point is that the SEA can play a strong and helpful role in assisting rural LEAs with the recruitment of effective leaders and teachers.

Staff Development

Encouraged by SEAs, rural LEAs in a given geographical area can create formal and informal consortia to plan common professional development days in which they bring in providers and share the costs. Rural LEA leaders can also seize opportunities to network professionally with other leaders to help them improve their knowledge and skills. For example, they can take advantage of the SEA-sponsored professional development networks of support offered in localities throughout the state.

A state official described the efficiency of district consortia. “Some of our rural LEAs have begun to form informal consortia and develop common professional development days, in which they bring in providers and share the costs. This reduces travel costs for personnel and maximizes the leverage they have for the expenses they incur.” Another questionnaire respondent added: “The rural LEAs that seem most successful seem to take the opportunities to network professionally with other leaders in order to help them improve their knowledge and skills. For example, they take advantage of the state-offered professional development networks of support that we offer. This helps the ones that are committed long term to have a network of peers to reach out to in their regions to be able to bounce ideas off of.”

Intermediate agencies in states are natural organizational structures through which the SEA can influence and incentivize the formation of cooperatives that provide services for rural LEAs that they are not able to provide themselves. In many states, regional or intermediate agencies are well established (e.g., Board of Cooperative Education Services in Colorado, Intermediate School Districts in Michigan). In other states, new regional structures have been established for the purpose of promoting school turnaround and improvement. For example, Tennessee recently created Centers for Regional Excellence to focus on turnaround and improvement in each region of the state.

The SEA officials reported various state-provided professional development opportunities, including training in specialized skill areas for SIG school personnel, typically delivered regionally to accommodate the travel barriers in rural districts. One state official described a Teacher Leader Development Symposium “to grow capacity in local schools/districts that the state facilitates in alignment

with our teacher growth work statewide through the new evaluation system. Also, our Turnaround Leadership Cadre is designed to develop principals who have the knowledge and skills to do the work.”

Coherence in state capacity-building initiatives results from the SEA’s internal coordination across its various departments with respect to all aspects of K–12 schooling but especially professional development. One state official explained:

We’ve attempted to develop an integrated strategy that pulls together a few different things to meet the needs of rural schools. First, we recognize that building the capacity of existing personnel is the number one need. Therefore, we focus on building the leadership capacity of administrators and teacher leaders to turn around and support their own teachers rather than rely on outsiders. The delivery mechanism has to overcome the problem of distance, though. Therefore, we retain school improvement funds (with LEA permission) and operate a system of technical assistance in which we can control the costs (e.g., the [State] Building Capacity Project, the Superintendents Network of Support, the Network of Innovative School Leaders). In that way, we can be deliberate about when and how to send technical assistance to the LEA versus when to bring the leaders together in a central location.

SEAs in states with rural LEAs involved in turnaround work are taking a variety of approaches to overcome the human capital obstacle in rural areas, particularly employing distance technologies that can deliver large amounts of useful information and insights relevant to rural education. The SIG program has given particular focus to these efforts.

Staff Evaluation

Almost by definition, the shortcomings of rural districts and schools in turnaround are at least partly attributable to inadequacies of leadership, teachers, and other staff. At the same time, it is difficult to fairly and accurately identify those who are not performing well, and their replacements can be traumatic for all schools and districts. SEAs can be helpful in developing and supplying the policies and practices to evaluate LEA and school personnel. Alternatively, LEAs themselves can develop the means for staff evaluation. In either case, the means to be successful should be expeditious, objective, fair, as humane as possible, and in conformity with SEA policy and the law. The U.S. Department of Education, through Race to the Top, SIG, and ESEA flexibility, has stressed the importance of robust teacher and leader evaluation systems for all districts and has encouraged states to lead the way with this reform.

As one questionnaire respondent stated: “The teacher evaluation system helped raise awareness of the need for some staff transitions and provided an opportunity for focused professional development plans, both for individual teachers and whole-staff training.” Ideally, formative evaluation would be

employed, that is, weaknesses would be identified, improvements suggested and checked, and periodically reevaluated. Turnaround situations, however, make formative evaluation insufficient, and summative evaluation must be chosen. This often necessitates dismissal, which raises the question of how a rural LEA can attract high-quality replacement staff.

Distance Technologies

SEAs potentially can have their greatest positive impact on rural LEAs and schools by developing distance programs crafted to the state's education needs and curriculum requirements and making the programs suitable for rural educators. As pointed out in the research review in the opening pages of this chapter, the distinctive characteristic of rural schooling is low population density, which means that, generally, rural districts have smaller schools and that resident families are often remote from one another. Various forms of distance education have long served rural families starting with written correspondence instruction, still employed in Australia's "outback."

Computer and internet technology, particularly instantly interactive methods tailored for individual abilities and interests of students, makes distance methods increasingly attractive, feasible, and employed as evidenced by "virtual schools" and other modern developments. Academics continue to study these technological transformations (Walberg & Twyman, 2013). At the Harvard Business School, Clayton Christensen revived such thinking about industries in general and argued that "disruptive technologies" are likely to transform schools (Christensen, 2006; Christensen & Horn, 2008).

Such developments reflect the broad changes in the American economy and society and are widely appealing to young people who are often much more facile with computers and the internet than older adults. Since a fundamental obstacle to rural education is distance, distance education is perhaps the most promising solution to their problem (Walberg & Twyman, 2013).

Technological change is leading to new products, services, and forms of organization, management, transportation, advertising, and financing. The internet is replacing traditional publishing; digital is replacing film photography; television, cable, DVDs, and downloadable media are replacing theaters; mobile cell phones are replacing pay phones and hardwired home phones.

Today, Google, Yahoo, iTunes, and other internet technologies challenge newspapers, book publishing, and music distribution. Contrary to the views of some long experienced educators, computer-based methods are at least as effective as traditional classroom teaching. As pointed out in *Improving Student Learning* (Walberg, 2011), the most extensive synthesis of research covering 232 control-group studies found that student achievement, attitude, and retention in online instruction were at least as high and often superior to traditional classroom teaching. Eight separate meta-analytic reviews revealed that offline

computer-based instruction had superior effects on student achievement. On average, students gained more knowledge in computer-based instruction and took more pleasure in learning than their counterparts in standard classrooms. Much of this research was decades old, and the newer technologies undoubtedly are becoming more effective and cost-efficient (Walberg & Twyman, 2013). As exemplified by Khan Academy, they are also becoming much more widely used.

A recent survey of the public, moreover, showed about a quarter thought middle and high school students should get credit for online courses (Howell, Peterson, & West, 2011). Expanded access to electronic media offers today's teachers and students, especially those in rural areas, effective and potentially cheaper new ways to teach and learn. In the long run, instructional technology is likely to prove increasingly more effective, cost efficient, and time saving than regular classroom teaching since technologies, particularly computer and internet technologies, are generally improving with time.

New electronic media can add sound, color, animation, and interactivity to text, adding stimulation for engagement. The internet can offer instantaneous and free, or inexpensive, access to content. When low-speed internet connections, slow computers, or both are a concern, CDs or DVDs provide large amounts of material which can be distributed at a low cost. Providers' websites or files on local servers also can provide access to materials for individual students or staff in education centers, schools, libraries, and classrooms—both for small-scale specific distribution and for uniform, large-scale curriculum adoption. However, CDs and DVDs cannot be easily updated like material on the internet—material that, like printed matter, should be vetted for accuracy, currency, and appropriateness of content (Walberg, 2011).

Policymakers at the state and national levels increasingly seem to agree on the value of having a stable set of specific curriculum offerings and standards, and some emphasize a core curriculum for the whole country.² This would make it far more worthwhile to develop online programs carefully designed and matched to the agreed-upon content and standards. As shown by many studies in economies of scale, spending sufficient funds for high-quality programs would increase learning and reduce the unit costs to the extent that increasingly large numbers of students are taught using this technology.

Conclusions

Being small is not necessarily a handicap for a school or a district, and neither is being rural. In fact, small, rural districts and schools generally perform well. But when a persistently low-achieving school is remotely located in a low-capacity, rural district, the district encounters unique challenges in managing a turnaround. These low-capacity, rural LEAs with persistently low-achieving schools stand in the greatest need of support from their SEAs. Listed below are

²Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/>

action principles for SEAs with low-capacity LEAs attempting to turn around their low-achieving schools.

Action Principles

- Disseminate information and sponsor conferences on ways rural LEAs and schools can best leverage the strengths of rural communities, such as the close attention of local school boards, the centrality of the school to community life, and the multiple connections among families.
- Help LEAs and schools ameliorate the “low-horizon mindset” that may restrict the aspirations of rural students and their families through distance learning, travel exchanges, college- and career-awareness programs, and similar initiatives.
- Provide training and information for rural school board members and administrators on human capital management and school improvement and turnaround.
- Expand the pool of leader and teacher talent available for recruitment by rural schools through alternate routes to certification, in-service leadership preparation programs, and state-fostered relationships with Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, and other human capital groups.
- Encourage college and university education programs to include coursework on rural education and collaborate with rural LEAs for regional job fairs.
- Incentivize employment in rural LEAs through salary differentiation, bonuses, loan repayment, and payment for travel expense.
- Organize and incentivize regional consortia, including those through intermediate agencies, of rural LEAs to coordinate their professional development activities.
- Expand and leverage distance technologies for professional development as well as student access to rich curriculum.

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