

Preparing Leaders for Rural Schools:
Practice and Policy Considerations



Institute for Educational Leadership

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

In the fall of 2004, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) convened members of the School Leadership Learning Community (SLLC) and invited guests for three invitational, issue-focused meetings. The meetings were supported by the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the mid-Atlantic regional educational laboratory at Temple University, through a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Each of the meetings was conducted as a modified Select Seminar (www.casdanyneric.org/history3.htm) and explored an issue specific to preparing and supporting school leaders.

The SLLC, a professional development and support network among the grantees in the U.S. Department of Education's School Leadership Program, is managed and supported by IEL. Barbara McCloud, Senior Leadership Associate with IEL, provided the primary project direction and coordination for the network. The network brings together, keeps together, and informs members across the country working to promote effective school leadership and increased student achievement for all students. All SLLC member programs are school leadership programs that are active partnerships among school districts, colleges and universities, and/or professional associations.

The IEL version of a Select Seminar rested on two principles: the participants were the experts and each voice was of equal importance. The discussions were held in an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue and participants were encouraged to "dig deeper" into the issues being discussed. The conversations captured busy professionals' knowledge and insights about preparing school leaders and identified promising practices being implemented across the country. A list of the diverse participants, which included SLLC members as well as invited guests with expertise in the issue area being discussed, is located at the end of the publication.

This report, *Preparing Leaders for Rural Schools: Practice and Policy Considerations*, provides field-based, joint insights—not silver bullets, not research findings, and not final solutions—collected from people working in and familiar with rural places and rural schools from Alaska to Louisiana to New Mexico and points in between. It shares and distills authentic conversations, anchored by participants' direct experiences in rural

schools. The conversations focused on best, worst, and promising practices and policy and program strategies that make a difference in programs and initiatives to prepare leaders for rural schools. Selected examples from participants are indicated by the diamond symbol. ■

PREPARING LEADERS FOR RURAL SCHOOLS: Practice and Policy Considerations

According to the Rural School and Community Trust, more people live in rural America now than did in 1950. Even by the U.S. Census Bureau's most stringent definition of rural—that is, open country and settlements with communities of 2,500 or fewer residents—almost one-third of the country's schools are in rural areas (Letters to the Next President, 2004). A significant number of these schools have very small enrollments and must bear the costs that come with negative economies of scale. Today, many once-homogeneous rural communities are also becoming increasingly diverse.

All public schools—regardless of factors like place and demographics—have much in common. Though rural schools and districts share with their urban and suburban counterparts many challenges as a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, they are particularly hamstrung by its demands in the areas of school accountability and teacher qualifications (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, January 2003). But, not only are rural schools different from urban and suburban schools—they also differ markedly from one another. Because each rural situation is unique, there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to either rural education or to the preparation of leaders for rural schools.

Since 2001 and the enactment of NCLB, the federal government has made it clear: student success is no longer optional. Henceforth, success for all students—regardless of race, ethnicity, income, language, disability, or geographic location—is a mandated outcome. This new expectation, though federally mandated, is nevertheless implemented by the States and by local school districts, and not by the federal government.

Implementing NCLB is challenging our approximately 17,000 school districts and approximately 94,000 elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics,

2001–02). NCLB places the responsibility for student achievement squarely at the district and building levels and on the shoulders of school building personnel, notably principals.

This leadership brief presents the major themes that emerged from the IEL Select Seminar on preparing leaders for rural schools. The accompanying insights and suggestions are offered for the consideration of those who strive to prepare school leaders who have the capacity to ensure that no rural child is left behind.

THEME 1

The identification, selection, and preparation of education leaders in rural America require tailored solutions and approaches.

Rural school leaders have to be generalists. Typically, school systems in rural America do not have assistant superintendents or a lot of other centrally focused staff such as federal programs directors or department chairs. Rural school leaders must be prepared to do many things, and the training programs must be multi-faceted.

The recruitment pool in rural settings is extremely small. Many talented teachers are not interested in leadership positions that offer a modest pay raise and a not-so-modest increase in expectations, including training, workload, and accountability. Recruiting outsiders is difficult and often unsuccessful. School boards may even be skeptical of applicants who have no ties to the community or who depart from the community's view of what a school leader should look like and of what a school leader needs to know and be able to do. As a result, turnover rates among outsiders are typically high, especially among those who do not take the time to understand and learn to work within formal and informal local structures.

◆ In six regions in Washington State, principals invite teachers who they believe have strong leadership potential to an evening reception sponsored by area businesses. Principals introduce their invitees and speak about their specific skills. The evening fosters positive relationships, and invited teachers often

go on to enroll in formal leadership training. (Gene Sharratt, Association of Washington School Principals, gene@awsp.org)

Seminar participants observed that off-site leadership training for individual principals can often have the unintended effect of building a second-tier leadership cadre among other school staff. Thus, the preparation of rural school leaders must shift from developing *individuals* to building and sustaining a *leadership team*. This will help to foster a climate for change throughout the school environment and can be accomplished through a *grow-your-own* strategy, which identifies local leadership potential early on. This strategy also creates a leadership pipeline and, by nurturing local talent, helps to meet the need for leaders who reflect the cultural identity of their schools.

In all cases, the presence of support structures and opportunities for networking are critical. Explicit district and school board policies must acknowledge the value of ongoing leadership training and provide employees with the release time to pursue it.

The education of a school leader never stops. So, in addition to preparing new leaders, preparation programs also must provide continuing support for established principals and superintendents. Non-credit courses and opportunities to meet with other leaders in structured and informal settings can help ensure that school leaders remain knowledgeable, challenged, and courageous and remain part of larger support networks.

◆ As a service provided through the Principals' Centers, Lewis & Clark College in Portland, OR, launched *Principal Gatherings*. These regularly scheduled events bring principals together for mutual support; meeting sites are arranged to keep participants' travel time to 30 minutes or less. The agenda is built around a specific issue that one member of the group brings to the table and is facilitated by retired principals known for their leadership excellence. There are few ground rules and no formal presentation. Rather, the learning formats include book studies, dinner meeting and conversations, weekend retreats, and/or mentor coaching. There are now 12 *Principal Gatherings* around the state. (Tom Ruhl, Lewis & Clark College, ruhl@lclark.edu)

THEME 2

A clear vision of the leadership skills and qualities needed must be developed; then each school must work with universities, colleges, and other partners to create preparation programs that meet those needs.

School leadership preparation programs need to prepare the school leaders that communities want and need, rather than simply perpetuate an existing leadership model. Today, school principals and superintendents must know how to do more than manage change—they must know how to lead it. They must be results-driven, but they must have a vision greater than simply turning around test scores.

The technical, conceptual, and people skills demanded of educational leaders have increased dramatically over the last decade. In current research, three important aspects of the principal's job have been identified (School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals—Review of Research, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, August 2005, <http://seli.stanford.edu/research/sls.htm>):

- Developing a deep understanding of how to support teachers;
- Managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning; and
- Developing the ability to transform schools into more effective organizations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students.

Although the exact mix of needed skills may vary somewhat depending on context, all certification programs prepare school leaders who can perform these important functions. Yet, survey after survey reveals that school leaders often feel unprepared to meet the challenges of the standards and accountability movement.

While many principal preparation programs emphasize administrative and management skills, much more needs to be done to help aspiring leaders deepen their knowledge and understanding of curriculum and instruction and develop an arsenal of strategies to promote student achievement.

- ◆ The state of Louisiana has worked with teams from all of the universities that prepare school leaders to begin building a framework based on their own quality success factors. The state told the teams, “We’re going to give you content knowledge and we’re going to help you. Your job is to go back and redesign your course and your program so that it meets this framework and gets at the critical success factors.”
(Kathy O’Neill, Southern Regional Education Board, kathy.oneill@sreb.org)

New skills are needed to collect and use data more strategically and to inform educational decisions. Rural leaders also must become both proficient and creative in using technology to promote access and reduce isolation. They also need more sophisticated interpersonal, collaborative, political, and community-building skills to strengthen relationships with staff, the community, and other civic institutions.

It may not be possible to train rural leaders for all the non-educational roles that they often have to play—plumber, bus driver, or jack of all trades. However, it is no longer enough to say, “Here are the keys, now do the job.”

- ◆ In Colorado, prospective principals participating in a year-long leadership program select a specific project that their school needs to address. They select their project by responding to the following question, “What is something *remarkable* that, through your leadership, your school could achieve in one year and that would significantly impact student achievement?” Projects have ranged from fostering math achievement to engaging faculty members in professional development around specific instructional strategies. Over the year, participants complete their project by engaging in a wide range of leadership experiences. All leadership experiences are summarized in an on-line resume. Participants also enter on-line monthly reflections on their progress and receive feedback on-line and during face-to-face meetings with a mentoring principal.
(Anne O’Rourke, New School Leadership Program, or2@rmi.net)

- ◆ The principal certification program operated jointly by Clarion and Slippery Rock Universities (PA) provides common elements (course modules), but also pays attention to individual strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Television is used in some instances to reach cohorts of students in different places. The program also works closely with the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Center for Principal Development to identify participants' strengths and weaknesses and then provides one-on-one work based on the assessment results. (William Kaufman, Riverview Intermediate Unit 6, wkaufman@riu6.org)

THEME 3

New partnerships are needed to provide better links between theory, research, and practice.

There is a serious disconnect between the school leadership training provided in university programs and courses and what happens in schools. The long-standing reliance on colleges and universities to define what schools need has led to an emphasis on specific courses rather than on a body of skills designed to meet changing leadership and student achievement demands. Survey after survey reveals that sitting principals are in agreement: their preparation programs have little if any bearing on the daily realities of their jobs.

Colleges and universities have a great deal to offer, but they must also be willing to listen to and act in concert with schools and the community. A few states currently allow non-academic organizations to train, certify, and license principals. This competition is likely to encourage universities to reach out to districts and make common cause. Universities must shed their ivory-tower image and change their role from gatekeeper to supportive partner. In addition, new models of collaboration among school districts, universities, and educational support structures (such as education service agencies) need to be developed at the regional level, much like the partnerships and collaboratives required for eligibility for the U.S. Department of Education's School Leadership Program. Such vertical integration helps pool resources and brings services to smaller districts.

- ◆ The University of Michigan–Flint has strengthened its preparation program by acknowledging the strength of others. As a partner in a statewide collaborative effort, the University invited the state welfare agency to help design a curriculum for its graduate-level leadership program. (Mike Kiefer, Urban Principals Leadership Academy, mikekiefer@umflint.edu)

THEME 4

Ongoing relationships with skilled and carefully matched mentors offer a powerful source of leadership preparation and support.

Continuing contact with a mentor, trusted coach, or critical friend is a central feature of many school leadership preparation programs. However, finding experienced leaders who can provide this kind of support can be especially challenging in rural settings. Recently retired principals often fill this role, but there are fewer of them available to assist in rural areas.

The fit between mentor and mentee is especially important; ideally mentors should have personal experience in rural settings. They also must have the ability to build a constructive relationship with their mentee, provide a sounding board, encourage deep reflection, and offer honest feedback.

Preparation programs need to ensure that mentors have well-developed coaching skills and the capacity to do more than share war stories or advocate for leadership strategies that worked in simpler times. In areas where mentors within the educational community are in short supply, preparation programs should be open to the possibility of recruiting successful leaders from other sectors—individuals who have wisdom, skills, and experiences to share. School leaders must also know how to 'mentor out' individuals who do not have the requisite skills to become effective school leaders.

- ◆ Recently retired principals in Washington State conduct six training sessions a year for cohorts of 15–20 rural leaders. These "venture" principals stay in regular contact with each cohort member

and provide “guide-by-their-side” support. The work is field-based, the content is based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, and participants engage in reflective journaling. Pre- and post-assessment results of participants and school staff are embedded in the program; the results show that participants experience considerable growth. (Gene Sharratt, Association of Washington School Principals, gene@awsp.org)

- ◆ In New Mexico, former principals known as “circuit riders” are an important part of a complex support system based in professional learning communities. These traveling mentors go from school to school in small districts that have no supports in place to assist new leaders. (Ann House, LeadNM, ahouse@unm.edu)

THEME 5

Community is a potent—but sometimes overlooked—source of leadership and support in many rural schools.

The link between school and community is especially strong in rural areas where schools often serve as community centers. The social and professional lives of rural school leaders tend to be highly visible. Effective principals and superintendents have strong connections to the community. They respect the formal and informal power structures that form the backdrop against which educational decisions are made.

Preparation programs need to help rural school leaders become careful listeners and learn how to nurture partnerships with constituents, school-board members, and a wide variety of community players to advance school goals.

- ◆ Work in Oregon helped set the stage for partnerships by pairing elementary principals with civic and business leaders. Assigned to work together on a joint project, they spent time at each others’ workplaces and realized that the problems that came across their desks every day were similar. This exposure developed a new degree of understanding and support across the sectors. (Tom Ruhl, Lewis & Clark College, ruhl@lclark.edu)
- ◆ School leaders in one Washington district realized that many of their Hispanic families came from a particular town in Mexico by way of a specific area in Texas. The district leaders decided to go to that area of Texas to recruit new teachers. Despite the distance, strong family and social ties closely connected the two areas and retention among new staff from Texas has been excellent. (Gene Sharratt, Association of Washington School Principals, gene@awsp.org)

Schools are often a major local employer; and in depressed, rural communities they control significant resources. Increasingly principals and superintendents need to serve not only as educational leaders but more broadly as community leaders and partners in economic development efforts. Schools in rural communities that have undertaken workforce development efforts are thriving.

- ◆ A major plant closed down in Hyde County, MO, and the consolidated career and technical training school decided to offer classes for adults at a convenient time. Some classes teach various clerical and business skills while others train nurse technicians to help meet the nursing shortage that is especially serious in rural areas. (Mary Kusler, AASA, mkusler@aasa.org)

THEME 6

Technology—combined with face-to-face sessions—provides an important tool for increasing access to more diverse school leadership preparation and support services.

Many areas of the country do not have the high-speed delivery systems needed to make on-line technologies work best. Meanwhile, many schools do not have the budget to maintain and upgrade their technology systems. And, in some cases, rural schools do not have the capacity to use the technology that is available.

At the same time, schools in many rural districts are hours away from a university and too remote for universities to provide field-based learning. Increasingly, technology offers isolated school leaders a source of peer support and a greatly expanded opportunity for continued learning. Preparation programs need to help school leaders learn to use new communications tools like listservs, threaded discussions, chat rooms, blogs, and on-line journaling. These tools enable geographically distant leaders to provide one another with professional support. Through a trial-and-error method, it was discovered that the technology-based tools work best if introduced after trust has been built through face-to-face sessions.

- ◆ Since none of the 10 districts we work with are within commuting distance of a university, Alaska began developing its distance leadership preparation program back in 1998. Today, Web- and telephone-conferencing allow students to present and discuss presentations and material. Each year 75 interns develop a Web-based portfolio based on the ISLLC standards and are expected to demonstrate the skills in each goal over the year. The interns' school principals serve as mentors and in the process deepen their own understanding of ISLLC knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Retention among trained leaders also seems to be improving. (John Monahan, Rural Alaska Leadership Coalition, drjohn@pobox.com)

- ◆ Providing on-line-leadership seminars served to increase enrollment at Mississippi State University fourfold in the first year, which turned out to be a blessing and a curse. At first, students could meet face-to-face on a monthly basis and have more flexibility in completing assignments and university staff had more time to conduct on-site field visits. [Note: Unfortunately, the increased enrollment proved overwhelming, and the on-line program has been suspended. Others considering this route should be prepared for unusually quick expansion in their student rosters.] (Ingrad Smith, Mississippi State University, Meridian, ismith@meridian.msstate.edu)

THEME 7

Certification, licensing, and pension policies need to be revised.

Certification, licensing, and pension policies significantly affect the recruitment and selection of rural leaders. Typically, students are admitted to and graduate from certification and master's-level programs based solely on their ability to complete courses and pay the tuition. Few programs build in performance requirements to ensure that candidates actually have demonstrable skills as well as knowledge. At the same time, a license bestows lifetime leadership status—a fact most universities see little need to change.

Although access to any kind of university program is a huge problem in many rural areas, in some locales low entrance and completion thresholds have led to a glut of teachers holding leadership certification. This training gives them additional credit hours, which in turn moves them up the pay scale—even though they are not actively seeking a leadership position. There is concern that over-certification drains both university and district resources and, in some cases, lowers the quality of trained leaders.

To solve this problem, preparation programs must implement recruitment and selection policies that help potential trainees self-select into and out of leadership programs. Such policies can be as simple as asking participants to formally reflect on why they want to become certified as a school leader and to identify

the extent of their passion for teaching and learning. Structured financial pathways, or stepped grades similar to those of teachers, may also help potential leaders better plan and meet career objectives. District efforts to keep student achievement and leadership issues front and center in their communities and before state legislative bodies can help mobilize more creative university and school responses.

Preparation programs can also help school district partners find more effective ways to use the untapped leadership resources extant among certified teachers. Encouraging certified leaders to serve on state and regional professional committees introduces staff to promising practices and increases the confidence and skills that help aspiring leaders assume new roles.

- ◆ When it became clear that half of the principals would be retiring in five years, one Kentucky school district realized it needed to ensure that they would be replaced by classroom teachers with principal certification. Recognizing that certification does not necessarily equal readiness, the district contacted the University of Kentucky for assistance in providing intensive professional development—focused on leadership for student learning—for administrator-certified teachers perceived as having potential as effective building-level administrators. Working with practicing principals and assistant principals gave the practitioners an opportunity to learn what would be required of them if they became school leaders. They also had an opportunity to see if they had the skills and desire to do the job. Nine of the 15 teachers who participated in the program now serve as principals or assistant principals in the high-need rural district. The other six administrator-certified teachers who participated in the program have applied for positions but have not yet been placed. (Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, University of Kentucky, ferrign@uky.edu)

Regional partnerships also can play an important role in addressing pension portability and reciprocal certification agreements. Several carefully considered policy changes may make it possible for seasoned school leaders willing to serve in rural areas to do so without being financially penalized.

THEME 8

There is a need for greater awareness of and more research on rural schools.

A lack of detailed knowledge about rural education and rural schools makes it easy for policymakers and program developers to assume that what works for urban schools will work equally well in rural areas. For example, most of the available research on small schools looks at enrollments between 400 and 600; little is known about the approximately 1,000 rural schools that enroll fewer than 150 students. In addition, there is only a limited understanding of the significant differences between rural schools in various regions of the country and of the impact of these differences on student learning. More research is needed to better understand rural schools, rural settings, and the challenges of rural school leadership.

THEME 9

Money matters.

While the issue of funding levels was acknowledged, it did not dominate the discussions. Participants understand that the demand for highly skilled educational leaders is increasing at the same time that many rural areas face declining budgets. However, there is a need for school district leaders and their community partners to inform state and local policymakers about both the shortage of money and leaders for rural schools. ■

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

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WEB SITES

e-Lead (<http://www.e-Lead.org>) is an important resource designed to increase the dissemination of effective principal preparation programs. It was developed by the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University and the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Select Seminar sponsoring organization.

This Web-based resource is organized around six research-based principles for the professional development of school leaders. It includes a searchable database of existing, standards-based preparation programs. A leadership library offers annotated information about a number of leadership development issues and

links to the latest information and resources. e-Lead's blog, *LeaderShipShape*, is designed to provide school and district leaders with the most current and relevant information on news, research, controversies, events, and opportunities in the field. ■

Ordering and Contact Information

Copies of this report are available for download at no cost from IEL's Web site. Requests for printed copies must be received in writing by fax, e-mail, or mail, and are subject to availability, plus a minimum charge of \$2.00 for shipping and handling. To order copies:

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