How on Earth Did You Hear About Us? A Study of Exemplary Rural School Practices in the Upper Midwest

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Are there characteristics unique to rural schools and communities that contribute to the success of their improvement efforts? A study commissioned by the Rural Advisory Council of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory sought an answer to this question in three Midwestern rural schools. We found that being rural, small, poor, insecure about their effectiveness in comparison to larger suburban schools, and well-integrated with their communities had an impact on the success of these schools' improvement efforts.

Although many decry the failure of educational research to be oriented toward practical application (Berliner et al., 1997), with help many schools and districts have had success translating this research into effective improvement initiatives. Yet frequently these successes remain localized because they are not systematically profiled or promoted (McDermott, 1997). Thus schools and districts hungry for information and "how to" advice rarely are able to take advantage of the wisdom and experience of those who are implementing these successful programs (Elmore, 1996). Those with the wisdom and experience often have few avenues for sharing with their colleagues or do not know how to reach a broader audience. This situation seems particularly acute among rural schools in the upper Midwest, where isolation and remoteness are typical and cross-district sharing rarely happens (D'Amico et al., 1995).

With this as backdrop, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) at the request of its Rural Advisory Council (RAC) set out to find, examine, and profile exemplary school improvement programs in rural schools and districts in the upper Midwest. The RAC saw this effort as a way to: (a) determine the extent to which rural schools and districts in this part of the country are "ahead of the curve" in their implementation of innovative improvement initiatives, (b) spread the word about these initiatives to rural districts across the region, (c) help all rural districts better understand what unique conditions and key processes underlie the success of these school improvement programs, and (d) provide rural districts with important information and-as gleaned from the experiences of those who had gone through it-to help them carry out school improvement.

This article is a summary of the first-year results. We profile three rural schools and the exemplary educational initiatives they have successfully carried out. We give special attention to important contextual factors that helped these schools succeed, particularly ones that are uniquely rural.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Because of its objectives and the nature of its intended outcome, our study combines journalistic and narrative methodologies (e.g., Bruner, 1987; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Richardson, 1994). To account for the wide diversity of locales, practices, and the like, and to incorporate unanticipated factors that became important as inquiries unfolded, this study also includes an overlay of grounded theory (e.g., Glaser & Strauss; 1967, Guba, 1981).

We also draw from several literature bases: the educational change literature (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 1993; Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984), the literature dealing with comprehensive school reform (e.g., Cuban, 1992; McDermott, 1997; Peterson, McCarthy, & Elmore, 1996), the literature describing the influence of context on change and innovation (e.g., Corbett et al., 1994; Fullan, 2000; Hatch, 1998), and the literature examining the rural context (e.g., Flora et al., 1992; Hobbs, 1994; Miller, 1993).

Site Selection

To keep the site identification and selection process manageable and to make sure the results would be useful to rural educators, NCREL focused on finding sites with initiatives in high-priority areas of rural school improvement. In other words, we were looking for initiatives in areas where rural educators felt they needed help. We also wanted to be sure to choose improvement areas where there were likely to be rural schools actually doing "good things."

NCREL also worked with members of the RAC to identify potential sites for investigation. As sites were recommended, NCREL conducted short telephone interviews with key staff (superintendents, principals, lead teachers, program coordinators, and the like) to get a better understanding of the initiative, its implementation, and impact. Specifically, NCREL sought to determine whether the initiative warranted visiting the site.

Therefore, the following questions were asked about the initiatives: (a) Is it occurring in a K-12 rural school district? (b) Is it based on research? (c) Is it data driven (that is, responding to well-defined and documented needs)? (d) Has it been operating long enough to show impact on student outcomes (test scores and other measures)? (e) Is it showing impact on those outcomes? (f) Is there congruence between program goals and program outcomes (is there a definite program plan)? (g) Is it operating throughout the system (that is, occurring in more than a single classroom) or on its way to spreading throughout the system?

Data Collection

Once it was ascertained that the site was one that should be visited, site researchers spent between 2-4 days on-site collecting information by interviewing a broad range of individuals, such as teachers, administrators, parents, students, and various community members. In addition, researchers observed key events that had been recommended by informants as appropriate. Among these were meetings, classroom interactions, and planning sessions. Finally, they reviewed documents and print materials related to the initiatives-from meeting notes to curriculum materials, student products, and grant proposals.

The Communities, Disuicts, and Schools

The rural places chosen for the study's first-year site visits are in different Midwestern states and each place is very different from the others. Buckton is in southern Ohio; West River is in east central Iowa; and Thumport is at the northwest tip of Michigan.

Buckton, Ohio

Buckton is a very small town tucked inside the Wayne National Forest in Wayne County. It sits just a few miles from a point where both Kentucky and West Virginia border Ohio. Buckton's economy has been on a downward spiral for a while. Industries have closed, businesses have shut down, unemployment rates have risen, and the average family income has dropped dramatically. Many have left the area in search of jobs. Those who have stayed, as well as the few who have come into the community, are *mostly* poor. Buckton sits at the bottom in terms of per *pupil* wealth in Ohio; 70% of the school-age children qualify for free or reduced meals. The deflation of the local economy is about the first thing Buckton's residents describe.

Raymond-Leonard Local School District serves the children of Buckton, as well as children from a number of other communities like Steel City, Bannockburn, and Loam Comers. The district offices are in Steel City. The district includes three buildings: a recently consolidated elementary school, a middle school, and a high school all named Raymond-Leonard. NCREL's site visit focused on the improvement initiatives at the elementary school.

The Raymond-Leonard Elementary School, formerly Buckton Elementary School, is the product of a 1996 consolidation that joined the three community schools of Buckton, Inkin, and Merrimac. It is located in the Wayne National Forest and this location has a negative impact on the school's-and the district's-revenue stream. The land is nontaxable; therefore, it does not generate any revenue for the school.

Formerly a K-8 building, the school now serves 650 K-5 students. It boasts a new wing built partly to accommodate the incoming students from the other schools. The school is clean and neat, and this newer section gives it a feeling of being modern even though most of it is pretty old. Forty-five teachers, two administrators (a principal and a dean of students), and anywhere from 10 to 15 volunteer aids staff the building.

Thumport, Michigan

Thumport is about a la-hour drive from Buckton, traveling north and west along interstates, state highways, and eventually county roads. It is almost as far north as one can go on the Leelanau Peninsula. which sticks out between Lake Michigan and the Grand Traverse Bay. It is 3S miles from one of northern Michigan's most popular tourist destinations, Traverse City, which also is one of the largest cities in the northern part of the state.

Thumport has become a very popular tourist destination with a large number of summer-only residents. The population of this small boating, fishing, and water resort

community can reach several thousand in the summer, even though there are only about 600 permanent, year-round residents. In part because of this huge influx of tourists and summer residents, Thumport is affluent-even by resort community standards.

Yet most of Thumport's year-round residents would be considered middle class, at best. And there are some living both in the community and nearby who are far from even middle class-migrant workers, watermen, and day laborers. More than a quarter of the community's school-age children qualify for free or reduced meals. There also is a Native American population living on a small reservation close to Thumport. Most work at the tribal casino complex.

An interesting and rather unique aspect of Thumport is the fact that its residents seem to be very well educated and progressive. This aspect of community culture plays a role in how the citizens of Thumport interact with their school.

The Thumport School District is a one-building district with all the students housed in one K-12 facility. The building has elementary, middle, and high school sections, but between classes and before and after school, the students mingle with little regard to grade level. The school is probably 30 or 40 years old, but it has been added to and modernized in parts. Some sections-notably the library-are "open" areas without walls or doors.

Students have access to a high level of up-to-date technology in lab and classroom settings throughout the building. The school is very well maintained and clean, even the multipurpose room that serves as both cafeteria and gym. The district superintendent's office is in the Thumport School, next door to the principal's office.

Three hundred forty-six students are enrolled at Thumport, and the school is very well staffed with 27 teachers, 6 part-time aides, 2 full-time aides, a counselor, a social worker, a part-time tutor for migrant students, and a full-time Title IX coordinator. The principal is the school's only administrator; but the superintendent frequently takes care of some school administrative tasks because her office is in the building. The principal sometimes reciprocates by doing district tasks.

West River, Iowa

West River sits close by the Mississippi River, a 9 1/2 hour drive south and west of Thumport. Although it is a rural community with a population of about 3,000, West River is not remote. It is 14 miles from Iowa City, home of the University of Iowa, and 10 miles from Pinotine, a fairly large city on the river's edge.

West River's economy is agriculture-based. Farms surround it, and a fairly large meat-processing cooperative is located just off the main square. There are stores in town and nearby selling farm machinery, seed, and supplies. And there are a group of small businesses in the center of West River including restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, mini-marts, and the like. A number of West River residents work in Pinotine and Iowa City. Some see the town as a bedroom conmmnity to these larger cities.

Somewhat unexpectedly, there is a large Hispanic population living in and around West River. This growing population first came to the town from Mexico and the American Southwest to work in a poultry-processing plant that opened over a decade ago. Many of the town's Hispanic citizens have long ago left behind work at the processing plant and have established themselves in businesses and the professions. They also have become a strong cultural presence. The small, four-square-block business district has three Mexican restaurants (all open 7 days a week for lunch and dinner and quite popular with both Latinos and Anglos) and a Mexican grocery store. The growth in numbers (now accounting for 30-40% of the population) and in cultural and social influence of this Hispanic population has had an important impact on West River.

The West River Community School District serves the students living in West River as well youngsters living on the many farms that surround the town. There are three schools in the district: one that houses Pre-K through grade 2; one with a grades 3-6 portion and a grades 7-8 portion; and a grades 9-12 high school. NCREL's interest lay largely in the improvement initiative for children at the Pre-K-2 levels.

The Pre-K-2 building is known as the West River Elementary School, even though there are elementary grades at what they call the middle school. It has a very old section, dating from the turn of the century, and several more recent add-ons. It is clean and well maintained. The building is remarkably well equipped with high-end technology, including three or four multimedia computers and an Internet connection in each classroom, in addition to a separate computer lab.

Three hundred twenty-seven students attend the elementary school; almost half are in Pre-K and kindergarten. Fifteen teachers, six aides, and the principal make up the full-time staff at West River Elementary. In addition, the district employs two bilingual aides who "float" from school to school. They also spend time at the elementary school.

The School Improvement Initiatives

As does school improvement everywhere, the improvement initiatives in these three rural schools reflect the needs, culture, and world-view of the communities where they are located. Thus they are diverse in their focal points as well as in the way they were introduced, implemented, and institutionalized.

Raymond-Leonard: Success Through Success for All

The consolidated Raymond-Leonard Elementary School is a poor school serving poor communities in a poor part of the state. As in many poor schools in America, Raymond-Leonard's students' economic situation seems to have had an impact on their academic situation. The school is ranked number 607 (out of 611 schools in the state) in terms of student wealth, with a shrinking economy making matters worse. Raymond-Leonard students ranked very poorly in terms of standard achievement measures.

The teachers and administrators working with Raymond-Leonard students were troubled that low achievement was common and that it was dropping year after year. Youngsters routinely were retained at grade level simply because they routinely failed. Moreover, more and more children seemed to be entering kindergarten with major language development deficiencies. Lastly, the staff saw an erosion of support from their students' parents, many of whom either did not understand how to provide it or did not have the time to become involved in their children's education. It seemed to these educators that major program modifications were needed to reverse the situation.

Even before consolidation, things began to change in 1993 when the district applied for and won a state Venture Capital grant. With the grant funds, the staff from the three elementary schools that eventually became Raymond-Leonard investigated and overwhelmingly voted to adopt *Success for All* (SFA), a research-proven model school reform program focused on reading instruction (Slavin & Maddin, 1995). With this decision, they joined the first group of a hundred schools to adopt this program.

What appealed to the elementary teachers was the fact that *Success for All* had a reported track record of boosting reading achievement in schools serving the same kind of at-risk, disadvantaged, and low-achieving children as they were serving. *Success for All* also seemed like a good fit for the students' particular needs. The program emphasizes early, intensive intervention for students beginning to have academic difficulties. It includes an extensive professional development component and ongoing technical, implementation assistance as well. In addition to a curriculum that includes phonics, meaning-focused instruction, cooperative learning, and curriculum-based assessment, *Success for All* includes an emphasis on active family involvement and support.

Specifically, for Raymond-Leonard, *Success for All* includes a 90-minute reading and language arts block, reading tutors for students in grades 1-3, reading assessments at 8-week intervals, cooperative learning, early learning programs, conflict resolution education, family support, site facilitators to oversee SFA implementation, and continued teacher training.

Equally important, the introduction of *Success for All* at the three schools that would soon become Raymond-Leonard served as what one staff person called "an igniter" for additional improvement initiatives. Among them were an all-day, every-day kindergarten established in 1995 to help boost the development of students entering the system; parent involvement that goes beyond what is required for SFA and includes parenting classes, an active parent-school organization, and extensive volunteering; school-community partnerships with local businesses, churches, and over 18 county and local social service agencies such as Shawnee Mental Health Services; and introduction of World Lab, the science and social studies component of *Success for All.*

We should note that fairly early in their move to install *Success for All,* the staff of the three schools that would become Raymond-Leonard realized that technology could help them and their students improve important achievement outcomes. Therefore, the district sponsored a parallel effort to make technology available to students and teachers. Flushed with the success experienced when collaboration with Ohio University and several businesses enabled creation of a high-tech environment in one third-grade classroom (called the Appalachian Distance Learning Project), the district took advantage of a number of opportunities to enhance their use of technology. In 1994 the school district received a grant from GTE, which allowed teachers, parents, and administrators to develop a comprehensive technology plan. That was followed by grants from School Net and School Net Plus, state technology initiatives that provided wiring and equipment for use in classrooms as well as software and training for teachers. By one estimate, at least $400,000 in grant money went toward technology at Raymond-Leonard.

Thumport: A Coalition of Initiatives Under a Coalition of Essential Schools Umbrella

Thumport School was one of the earliest adopters of the Coalition of Essential Schools approach to school improvement in the country. The notion of becoming a Coalition school was first introduced in 1993; the Coalition approach was formally adopted a year later; and the school received official Coalition certification in 1995. Interestingly, however, becoming a Coalition school was not Thumpon's first improvement initiative, nor is being a Coalition school what they are most well known for. As a practical consideration for the staff, students, and parents of Thumport School, the Coalition of Essemial Schools is a convenient tent under which to assemble and organize a variety of improvement efforts. It is the Senior Projects program that is their signature improvemem initiative.

The Senior Projects program is at base an alternative assessment initiative stressing performance-based, interdis-

ciplinary projects that seniors are required to complete in order to graduate. The students rake the better part of their senior year to complete their projects and are helped along the way by teams of teachers-and sometimes community members with special expertise-acting as guides, mentors, and formative evaluators. The senior project culminates in a "performance" during which the student explains the project, describes the processes he or she went through to complete it, and presents the results. The performance takes place in front of an audience of school staff and sometimes community members. It is a very special and important occasion for all concerned. It also has become the capstone of a student's career at Thumport.

The evolution of the Senior Projects program and its eventual integration with the Coalition of Essential Schools (and the way other disparate improvement initiatives were collected under the Coalition rubric) is a fascinating example of how perception, vision, and necessity came together. It also is a good example of how hard a school community will work together to make sure their students have a valuable, useful educational experience.

In the early 1980s there was a feeling on the part of some Board of Education members that the Thumport graduates were not as well prepared for college life as their suburban or urban counterparts. This contingent, variously characterized as the "intellecruals" or the "very knowledgeable," believed that Thumport School was providing students with an excellent education, but they were concerned that these students might drop out of college nonetheless. Specifically, they were concerned that their graduates would not be able to adjust to the loose structure of college life, the high levels of individual responsibility required for success in college, and the need to study and work without close adult supervision. Even though there does not seem to have been any concrete evidence that this concern was justified (i.e., no Thumport students ever had dropped out of college because they could not make these adjustments), it was still a concern. And the "intellectuals" were able to garner strong consensus among the other board members around it.

The superintendent at the time was one of these "intellectuals." Along with a few board members and teachers, he designed and installed the Senior Project program. They believed that the program would give the students an authentic, thematic experience that also required them to work independently with minimal adult supervision very much like the ones they would have in college. They saw it as a kind "college life" simulation and a way to provide Thumport students better preparation for college life.

This has proven to be the case as Thumport graduates overwhelmingly have had successful college careers. **It** bears repeating, though, that there was no solid evidence that this might not have happened even without the Projects. Current administration points out that the school's gradua-

tion rate consistently has been 100%, and the rate of postsecondary completion nearly as high.

For nearly a decade, the Senior Projects program quite successfully met the outcomes intended for it. The program was expanded to include juniors and sophomores, who conducted their own projects as a sort of rehearsal/preparation for their senior year projects. As the 1980s became the 1990s, however, the state of Michigan, which had long been relaxed regarding local school accreditation, began strongly urging school districts to get accreditation from some external agency.

Concomitantly, key staff and board members became interested in expanding the Senior Projects program and making it school-wide. During this time, a new superintendent was hired who introduced them to The Coalition of Essential Schools. As they became more familiar with it, they became impressed with the Coalition approach. It offered them a recognized program that could serve as an umbrella under which they could place this expansion. It also offered a way to get accreditation from a respected source. Moreover, it fit nicely with the board's educational philosophy and the Senior Project program. It was adopted unanimously a year after it was introduced.

The Coalition of Essential Schools, based on the educational philosophies and research of Theodore Sizer and his colleagues, is more of an approach to education than it is a program with specific curricular, instructional, or organizational components. It is designed as a guide to improvement and reform rather than as a blueprint (Herman et al., 1999; Sizer, 1984).

It is important to emphasize that the Coalition of Essential Schools has no particular curriculum component. As long as the principles having to do with curriculum and instruction are reflected, almost anything will work. There are no particular instructional approaches associated with the Coalition either. Finally, even though the Coalition literature does not prescribe any particular school or classroom organization, the philosophy is based on Sizer's observations that 50-minute class periods are just not a good way to go (Sizer, 1992).

Even though the Thumport staff subscribes to the Coalition of Essential Schools approach, they have tailored it to reflect things they believe are important. Thus they have derived their own Belief Statement. This statement, as well as sets of student outcomes for each school level, seem to be the school's goals.

Thumport has installed a number of additional reforms designed to scaffold their implementation of the Coalition principles and support their efforts to expand the Projects program to all grade levels. Among these reforms are *Success for All* and *Roots and Wings* (Herman et al., 1999, New American Schools, 1998), which constitute a significant portion of the elementary school curriculum; thematic instruction, mastery learning, and cooperative learning ap-

proaches; block schedules, shared grades, and common planning time for grade-level teachers; critical friends groups and meetings as the formal basis for all teacher professional development; and use of state standardized test results as important outcome measures.

It appears that both the Projects program and the Coalition of Essential Schools are firmly institutionalized at Thumport. The former has maintained itself---even grown-for 17 years and across three major changes in school and district leadership. Most see only positive results for all concerned. Graduating seniors return with high praise for the Projects program. They firmly believe that doing a project gave them a leg up, providing them with many of the skills and attitudes necessary for being comfortable and successful in college. Staff, administration, and board members also indicate that spreading the Projects program to the rest of the grades has been beneficial for students.

Although the Coalition implementation has had a less direct effect on students, it seems to have had an enormously positive effect on district staff and the general ambience of the school. They praise its impact on their work life and on what they consider to be important student outcomes. In fact, several staff said that because the Coalition principles and approaches made the quality of work so attractive, they were willing to wait or work as aides in order to finally get a position in the district.

Significantly, understanding of and willingness to support the Coalition approach has become another job qualification. Both the new Superintendent and several newly hired teachers said they were explicitly told this in their interviews. Lastly, during recent contract negotiations, the teachers' bargaining unit insisted that the Coalition approach and associated support systems be included in their contract.

West River: A Dual Language Program for a Dual Language Population

West River has installed a two-way, Spanish/English immersion (Dual Language) program- the first such program in Iowa. It is designed to teach English-speaking students Spanish and Spanish-speaking students English. This is accomplished by having teachers teach all subjects in the core curriculum 50% of the time in English and 50% of the time in Spanish. According to the district leadership, this program, largely funded by a Federal Title VII grant and a state ESL grant, has the following five goals: (a) make the curriculum truly accessible to limited English proficient (LEP) students, (b) increase the academic achievement of regular and LEP students, (c) implement Spanish language instruction in the primary grades, (d) develop respectful cross-cultural relationships, and (e) provide opportunities for substantial parent involvement by creating home-school partnerships.

When we visited, the program was being implemented in three grades-Pre-K, Kindergarten, and first grade-with a total of 120 students participating. The district had plans to expand it to third and fourth grade, with students moving out of Dual Language and into a more traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the fifth grade. Staff felt that the literature supports this decision, although they originally based it on practicalities of time and funding. The program is purely voluntary, and parents must request that their children participate. Despite this, participation is rather competitive, with far more applications than available spaces.

The program reflects the research of Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas from George Mason University (Collier, 1995; Thomas & Collier, 1997). These authors examined six different approaches to language instruction. They concluded that two-way immersion is the most effective approach to meet the goals of improving Spanish students' proficiency with English while boosting their academic performance (by teaching complicated content in their own language as well as English). They also found that the dual language approach is effective for providing Spanish instruction for English-speaking students in the elementary grades. This research was used extensively to design the West River program.

An interesting aspect of the West River version of the Dual Language program is that students may not cycle in. That is, students may only enter the program as Prekindergarteners. The original intention was that the program would cover all grades (K-12), and eventually all West River students would have their instruction 50% Spanish and 50% English. But, as noted, this plan was changed.

As unexpected as this program seems- in a small rural school in eastern Iowa-the motivation for adopting it is grounded in a reality that the district leadership deserves a great deal of credit for recognizing. West River has had a steadily growing Hispanic population over the last decade or so. Increasing numbers of Hispanic workers and their families coming to work in the poultry processing plant gave West River one of the fastest growing permanent Hispanic populations in Iowa. As they established themselves financially, these Hispanic residents also began to establish themselves as a sociocultural force in the community.

Because most came to be permanent residents and thus brought families with them, the number of Spanish-speaking students in the West River schools steadily increased as well, until they now represent 36% of the student population. In response, the schools established a comprehensive K-12 ESL program, one of the first in the state.

Yet, although they believed this program to be effective, school staff also began to feel it was inadequate for the Hispanic students' needs. Staff observed that despite their own best efforts, the ESL students continually fell behind the English-speaking students as curriculum con-

tent became more complex (i.e., as they went up in the grades). Their reading of the research convinced them they needed to enhance their existing ESL program to eliminate all barriers that prevented the Hispanic students from excelling academically.

As an important aside, there were two parallel situations helping to move the district towards the Dual Language approach. First, Hispanic parents expressed growing concern that in an effort to "fit in," their children were no longer using the Spanish language routinely. In the eyes of their families, they were losing their knowledge of and respect for their culture. Second, a contingent of school staff and parents felt it was important to provide second-language instruction to English-speaking students at the elementary level.

In the midst of all this, the school administration saw an opportunity to acquire Federal Title VII money to expand and enhance their ESL initiatives. And so was born West River's Dual Language program.

As one would imagine, this program makes some unique demands on the curriculum, instructional delivery, and staff. The Dual Language curriculum is basically the district's core curriculum arrayed by subject area-language arts, science, social studies-but with Spanish as a second language for students who are English-speakers and English as a second language for Spanish-speakers. None of these curriculum areas is taught as a specific subject, however. The core subjects are integrated and taught thematically, and students learn either the Spanish or English language through exposure only.

This approach has proved especially challenging when teachers are called upon to teach in Spanish. Participating teachers say it is difficult to find materials appropriate to some themes in Spanish, and also to teach skills (in either language) when using a thematic approach.

Although the program does not specifically require any special classroom organization or management, all the participating teachers have bilingual aides. All teachers say the aides are absolutely necessary. In addition, the program operates in two sections in each grade; therefore, the teachers must collaborate and creatively deploy their students to accommodate the split. This need for special classroom organizational and management arrangements is more important as the program moves upward through the grades. Thus, the first-grade teachers literally move their students from room to room as they shift the language of instruction-English only in one room, Spanish only in the other.

Staffing and staff development are crucial components of West River's Dual Language program. Of the six teachers currently participating in the program, five are fully bilingual and one speaks only English. There also is one full-time coordinator, and the Director of Special Projects estimates that she spends 60% of her time on the program. As the program continues to expand, district leadership has

tacitly added Spanish language fluency to its criteria for hiring.

In the early stages of adoption, participating teachers and aqministrators spent a "study year" doing research and visiting other places (notably Chicago and Milwaukee) where this kind of program operated. While on these visits, many joined in professional development activities in order to sharpen their own skills. The current program has no special professional development related to curriculum or instructional design associated with it, however. Teachers in the program engage in the same curriculum design and lesson development activities and opportunities as the rest of the staff. One participating teacher, uncomfortable with her level of Spanish proficiency, engaged in a Spanish language immersion experience during one summer, living with a family in Costa Rica. The district paid for this experience.

Because the program is grant-funded, the district keeps very close account of student impact data. These data clearly show across-the-board positive results in key areas of leaning and achievement. Anecdotally, the Pre-K and K teachers point to a number of positive impacts the program has had on students. These include children "thinking" in their non-dominant language, children talking at home in the non-dominant language (especially Anglo children), more comfortable interaction between Hispanic and Anglo students, and of course increased fluency in the non-dominant language.

Elements of Success

As dissimilar as these schools are, one can see a number of common elements underlying the success of each. To be sure, these elements are quite consistent with educational change theory. Nevertheless, few in the schools recognized either the elements themselves or their influence. "We never thought of that," was a typical comment.

Culture Stressing Continuous Improvement, Reflection, and Self-Analysis

All staff and community members expressed a genuine commitment to improvement for the sake of the students. Along with this commitment to improvement there was a strong willingness to look critically at what was going on in the school to see what worked, what did not, and what should be changed.

Culture Amenable to Change and Experimentation

Consistent with this culture of self-analysis the staff at these schools was willing to make necessary changes even if they involved some risk. In no case was there rigidity, denial about the need to change, or attempts to promote

some other agenda. And the willingness to experiment and change extended to the communities where these schools are located as well.

Attention to Principles of Change

Those initiating and managing the changes at these schools paid close attention to essential change principles. For example, these schools paid close attention to the "vision thing," making sure they had a clear "big picture" view of what should happen and what would be the positive results. In addition, they "worked the process," encouraging early adopters, providing them with additional resources and perks, and using them to develop the next set of adopters. Lastly, they "worked" the allies they had in school and out in the community, using them to explain, promote, and market the improvement efforts.

Solid Research

A school improvement initiative was selected and introduced only after extensive research had been done. School and district staff-sometimes in collaboration with the board of education or community representatives-not only analyzed themselves to determine what was needed to improve their instructional results, they also analyzed research literature, available programs, and even other instances of implementation. In every case, the research started with an assessment of instructional effectiveness and needs.

Local Adaptation

These schools and districts made adaptations to the programs they selected to ensure that they would answer their particular needs and also match well with their school and community context.

Added Resources

For these schools, money mattered. It is unlikely that any of them would have been as successful had they not had additional resources. These additional resources allowed the time for critical self-analysis, research investigation, and planning activities. The extra resources also paid for essential staff development activities. Most importantly, the additional resources ensured that they could make long-term investments in their improvement initiatives.

The Role of the Rural Context

Beyond these rather standard change-theory dimensions, however, there are aspects of these schools' rural context that significantly influenced their success.

Rural, Poor, and Small

The fact that these schools are in rural locations and two are resource-poor provided a real boost as all moved through the life cycles of their improvement initiatives. As "poor" rural districts, two of them were eligible for special consideration by federal and state grant-making agencies. And all three schools received grant money that enabled them to acquire extra resources that they used for the sometimes sizable extra costs associated with school improvement. Among the extras they used this money for were extensive research, site visits, materials, substitutes, professional development, and technical assistance. Moreover, those that adopted the model programs, *Success for All* and Coalition of Essential Schools, received special attention from the developers who were anxious to show they were serving rural, poor populations.

Small size was an additional plus. With few students and staff members, these schools could keep up a fast pace as they moved their improvements through their life cycles. Fewer had to buy in, adopt, and implement for fewer students. With small size comes a small-or nonexistent-administrative superstructure, which usually translates into fewer bureaucratic requirements, check points, and thus roadblocks. Therefore the improvement programs moved rather quickly from the planning stages to implementation and institutionalization.

Small size also allowed the schools to show significant impact quickly. When nearly 10% of the total district teaching force (6 teachers out of 66) show measurable literacy, reading, and writing gains among 96% of all students in a program, as was the case in West River, other teachers take notice. Parents take notice too.

Rural Insecurity

More subtle influences of rural context were also at work. One such influence has to do with a kind of uneasiness expressed by staff and community that these rural schools do not "measure up" when compared to suburban or urban schools. Thumport is a good example of how this uneasiness worked as a motivator as they installed their various improvement initiatives.

One of the first things that one hears from the Thumport staff is that their students are very successful. When asked how many Thumport students graduate, the principal answered, "They all do." When asked how many go to post-secondary schools, his answer waSthe same; then he began reciting an impressive list of colleges Thumport's graduates have attended. He went on to note they have been sending their children to this caliber of school for decades. Yet at a different time, when asked why Thumport felt it necessary to introduce the Senior Projects program and become a Coalition of Essential Schools site. he replied, "We

didn't think our students were prepared well enough for college. We felt we needed to help them measure up better to the urban and suburban kids."

His sentiment-and the sentiment of nearly all the people-was that partly due to their rural context, these schools were not as good as suburban or urban schools. This insecurity in part led them to feel a need to improve. At Raymond-Leonard and West River, this sentiment was based on hard facts as. At Thumport, it was as much perception as fact.

Whether well-founded or not, this uneasiness acted as a motivator for the educators and communities to begin the process of improvement. Moreover, proving they could "measure up" became a challenge that gave both the schools and the communities the determination and persistence to make the improvement initiatives succeed. This challenge also gave them a set of common goals.

Integration of School and Community

The ability of the schools and their communities to agree upon and take action to meet common goals gets at still another influence of the rural context. In the Midwest, rural people have a long tradition of pulling together to help each other out. Based on the belief that the community has a responsibility to the individual and vice versa, there is an important, even vital, link between the community as a whole and certain community institutions. For many rural Midwesterners, the school is the most critical rural community institution. In some ways, it comes to symbolize the community itself. "When the school goes, the community dies," is a common lament in Midwestern rural communities.

Peshkin (1978) examined this linkage and, in rural Illinois, observed what he calls "the integral relationship between school and community" (p.8). Noting that people often talked about the notion of school, of school district, and of community almost interchangeably, Peshkin saw this phenomenon as an indication of a higWy integrated--even intimate-interrelationship among these entities. This kind of integration showed up in fairly uniform ways in our rural places and it played a positive role in school improvement.

For example, the school buildings themselves are seen to be community focal points. Geographically, they are physical landmarks. They are "right there," as one West River parent put it, meaning they are highly visible, sometimes the largest, most prominent structures in the community. Likewise, from an economic point of view, these rural school districts are dominant economic focal points in their communities, important community and regional employers.

These schools also sometimes are community social and cultural focal points. In Thumport, the school is an all-purpose facility and a kind of central gathering place serving as the home for a wide range of community events that are both educational (adult basic education classes) and semi-educational (summer camps, aerobics, or art classes). The Raymond-Leonard school serves as a branch office of the regional mental health services and as a base camp for the yearly community charity drive.

As the institutional distinctions between school and community blur, these rural communities have made more than just an educational investment in the schools. They devote the same amount of energy, enthusiasm, and emotion as they do to the community itself. The schools have become a source of community pride and symbolize the much of the communities' values and way of life (see Swidler, 2000). With this broader investment, maintaining quality schools became a community goal in these school districts. And as is often the case in rural communities, they engaged themselves aggressively in this goal (Howley, 1997).

Their investment in their schools' success led them to create allegiances to the schools that superceded social, economic, and even ethnic allegiances. When the educators in these communities said their programs were designed to benefit all students, they meant it. More significantly, the results of the initiatives they installed show it.

This integration of rural school and rural community and the investment that results from it could be seen on a more human level, as well. Generally, in rural communities there isn't much of a line separating the school people from the rest of the community members. In our cases, most of the educators were also community members. Not only did they work in the schools, most lived in the communities where the schools are located. They socialized with other community members, did business in the community, and consciously took advantage of 'hat the community had to offer.

We could see them walking to schools- sometimes with their own children- and getting coffee and doughnuts at the local café on their way. In the evenings, we saw them eating dinner at the local restaurant and attending school plays, sporting events, and fund-raisers. We were surprised to find how many had been raised in these communities or nearby and how many had spouses who were from the community.

With this kind of school/community integration on many levels, the educators in these communities were not bogged down by the institutional, economic, professional, place-of-residence, or social barriers between themselves and their community that often exist in suburban or urban schools. Social interaction and professional interaction were mixed and informal, but essentially they occurred simultaneously and continuously. They also had a definite impact on the improvement initiatives because they facilitated the engagement of the community in these initiatives.

The school people were emphatic that being members of their rural community was a great advantage for facilitating their aggressive efforts to build community support and buy-in. It gave them more OppOltUnity to sell their ideas and to do market testing to see how these ideas might be received and how they should be modified. In West River and Thumport, the school people were convinced they would have had trouble even getting the initiatives off the ground if they had not been able to interact with COmmunity members person-to-person.

Once they established community commitment to the improvement initiatives, the school people again relied on their status as community members to make sure the initiatives were meeting student and parent needs. They took advantage of every interaction to keep the community aware of what was happening. They took pains to always be aware of what community members liked and did not like. Additionally, as community members it was easier for them to see (and hear) how their actions affected children's lives and to keep track of particular student's needs. They saw them and their parents in both school and non-school situations.

Thus the educators from these rural communities could engage community members beyond simple buy-in and endorsement: giving them a planning and development role, seeking their assessments, getting them to pinpoint needs, asking for guidance, and so forth. The school people were quick to point out the value that this deeper level of community engagement had for their initiatives' successes. It led to broad consensus in the school and in the community about what the school improvement initiatives should do, be, and become. Furthermore, it facilitated the mobilization of resources, energies, and personal investment - again among both the school people and the community members-around these goals. And it worked to keep school and community involved in doing what they needed to do to meet the goals.

Significantly, teachers and administrators also noted this deeper engagement caused them to feel a strong, almost personal, responsibility to make sure the initiatives succeeded lest they let down the community. There were community members who said they felt the same way.

How on Earth Did You Hear About Us?

Our site investigations were not the first time the programs in these schools had been studied. Others had visited them and they have been referenced as "exemplary" schools regionally and statewide. Yet nearly all the people we spoke with in these schools were almost embarrassed by the attention. In fact, in West River, teachers continued to ask us during our interviews how on earth we heard about them. and why we thought they were worth studying. They saw what they were doing as rural school people see nearly

everything extraordinary they do: as simply doing what needs to be done to help the kids and the community succeed.

Perhaps this is why we do not have more examples of successful rural schools that have done the extraordinary. They are there in the Midwest and all across the country-we know they are-but maybe they feel they are just doing what needs to be done. And their humility about their remarkable accomplishments is keeping their wisdom, expertise, and experience from others who really could use it.

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