

TRANSFORMING THE RURAL SOUTH:

A Roadmap to
Improving Rural
Education

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State Collaborative on Reforming Education



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For our rural communities, the connection between a quality education and a vibrant, sustainable economy has never been clearer. Unemployment rates in rural communities continue to outpace state and national rates. To get the jobs of the future, even in fields like manufacturing and agriculture which have not traditionally required postsecondary education, businesses are requiring that their workers obtain higher levels of education than ever before. In the face of these challenges, it is clear that making investments in education must be part of any strategy to ensure that our region remains economically vibrant and globally competitive.

In the South, how our rural schools fare, and the impact this has on our economic health, is especially important. Compared to the rest of the country, not only do Southern states have a larger percentage of schools with unique rural challenges, such as limited access to resources and high staff turnover, but they also have a larger percentage of underperforming rural schools. These states, which include swaths of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta, have more rural communities that are chronically poor and, as such, have greater challenges when it comes to improving student achievement. We know that as a state and as a region, we won't be able to achieve our ambitious goals without focusing on our rural schools and communities.

It has become clear to us that not only is a plan of action for how to transform rural education needed, but it also must be deliberately and intentionally tailored to our southern context.

Earlier this year, SCORE conducted a listening tour in preparation for the Southeast Regional Rural Education Summit to learn more about the barriers our rural communities face, to identify the best practices that are already occurring in our state and region, and to determine what lessons can be replicated in other areas. Their success at utilizing the resources at their disposal to improve student achievement gives us hope that our other rural communities can too.

The priorities that follow are based both on research and the voices from our rural communities about what they need to ensure their students and communities can meet the demands of a changing world. They highlight not only what must happen inside the classroom and the school house, but also what needs to happen in the community.

Highlighting the Connection Between Education and Economic Development

The connection between a quality education and a vibrant, sustainable economy has never been clearer, particularly in many of our rural communities. Unfortunately, in the communities that could benefit the most, there is often a lack of awareness about the crucial connection between educational attainment and attracting new jobs.

Business and Community Leaders

- Continue to stress the individual and community importance of obtaining a high school diploma and pursuing postsecondary training and education by highlighting sectors that will face job shortages because of a lack of qualified applicants
- Collaborate with K-12 as well as the postsecondary community to align workforce needs and student interests and abilities with dual enrollment opportunities, career and technical training, and other advanced course offerings
- Forge public-private partnerships around college access, including raising money for last dollar scholarships for 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities

State Policymakers and Local Elected Officials

- Take a leadership role in stressing the connection between education and jobs
- Make investing in public education the top priority to improve local economic development
- Ensure education policy is aligned with workforce needs and economic goals

Educators and Parents

- Set the expectation that all students graduate high school and go on to postsecondary education or a career

Offering Schools and Districts More Flexibility

Due to geographic isolation in many of our rural communities, families have few educational alternatives if their children are zoned for a failing school. Some rural communities are beginning to experiment with new ways to rethink the way that schools and districts are structured to ensure that students have access to a high quality education.

State Policymakers

- Build in flexibility for school funding so schools and districts can easily provide instruction across districts through distance learning and online technologies, ensuring students have access to high-quality educational resources in other areas

State Departments of Education

- Significantly increase the capacity of field service centers – satellite offices located throughout the state – so they can meaningfully help schools and districts implement reforms rather than merely focus on compliance
 - Encourage regional collaboration among school districts to build additional capacity and share resources and best practices
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Forming a Pipeline of Effective Teachers

Although recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers is a challenge for all schools, it is particularly difficult in rural areas. Geographic isolation, lower wages, and professional isolation make recruiting and retaining effective teachers in rural areas more difficult.

State Policymakers

- Offer incentives for teachers to teach in hard to staff schools and subjects, especially addressing these needs in rural areas
- Require the postsecondary community to enhance their teacher preparation programs to expose candidates to actual teaching settings in rural communities as a dual strategy to improve teacher effectiveness and recruitment to rural schools

State Departments of Education

- Identify supply and demand patterns for teachers throughout the state
- Assist local school districts in their efforts to provide high quality professional development to teachers
- Bring together educators from different regions so they can share best practices and innovative strategies
- Require schools and districts to form postsecondary partnerships in the school improvement process to create a pipeline of effective educators that are interested in teaching in rural areas

Schools and Districts

- Partner with nearby districts to recruit and retain highly effective teaching candidates who can serve as content specialists in critical subjects like reading and math across district lines
 - Work with high quality non-profits to fill teaching positions
 - Call on effective teachers to lead professional learning communities at the school level to support new teachers in implementing lessons learned from high quality professional development opportunities
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Utilizing Technology to Meet Instructional Needs

Students in rural schools often lack access to rigorous, college preparatory coursework due to low enrollments and a lack of qualified teachers. Similarly, students in earlier grades often lack access to teachers who are specialists in areas such as early reading comprehension that are critical to students' future academic success. Rural educators often work in isolation and, in turn, have weak professional learning communities that reinforce ineffective practices. Technology has emerged in recent years as a critical part of the solution of helping schools meet instructional needs.

State Departments of Education

- Conduct research to identify what virtual school efforts, both in and out of state, have been successful at improving student achievement and share these lessons with districts that are in the process of starting their own virtual schools
- Assist local schools and districts in their efforts to provide high quality professional development for teachers so they can effectively integrate online learning techniques into their lessons plans
- Align online resources with state standards so students in geographically isolated locations have access to materials that enrich instruction and illustrate concepts quickly



Postsecondary Community

- Integrate effective technology practices into training programs so teachers can effectively blend online and traditional teaching strategies when they begin teaching
- Call on faculty members to provide professional development on needed topics and content areas to teachers working in remote areas through distance learning and other technologies

Districts

- Embrace and utilize distance learning technology to ensure that all students in the district have access to supplemental and advanced coursework and teachers who can effectively deliver instruction in those content areas

Creating Professional Learning Communities for Administrators

In those rural schools that experience success in improving student achievement, school leadership has a large role to play. However, in rural areas, administrators often lack access to robust professional learning communities due to the small number of administrators in their systems and physical distance between administrators in other districts.

State Departments of Education

- Enhance existing professional development opportunities by using technology to connect school leaders across districts so they can share best practices on what works and what doesn't when setting a vision of reform for rural schools and engaging all stakeholders in it
- Assist districts in providing high quality professional development opportunities for current and future rural school leaders

Forming Community Partnerships to Enhance Educational Opportunities

The success of rural schools and their surrounding community is inextricably linked. In those schools and communities that are making strides, partnerships have been forged between schools and other stakeholders in the community to improve student achievement.

Business Community and Local Schools

- Provide students with opportunities, such as internships, job shadowing, and project based learning, to help them make the connection between what they are learning in school and their future educational and career paths

Non-profits, Districts, and Local Schools

- Work with parents to educate them on the importance of postsecondary education, provide support, such as financial aid training, to raise postsecondary going rates, and better engage them in the education of their students
- Provide students with the extracurricular supports they need, such as out of school time programs, to be ready to perform in the classroom
- Align non-profit programs with local school district priorities

Philanthropic Community

- Invest in rural communities to help them enhance efforts that have already proven successful
- Aid schools and districts in creating a plan for reform and then serve as a critical partner to continuously measure success and imbed effective practices into the culture and operation of the district

School Districts

- Form regional partnerships with other school districts to go after philanthropic and federal grants to advance school reform efforts



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