

# Lessons Learned

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## Leveraging the Unique Features of Small, Rural Schools for Improvement

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**MUCH OF THE NORTHWEST REGION (ALASKA, IDAHO, MONTANA, OREGON, AND WASHINGTON) IS RURAL IN NATURE.** A characteristic of the extractive economies such as timber, agriculture, mining, and fisheries is that they are generally located in small communities isolated by distances. While schools in these communities face the same challenges as those in other settings, geographic context matters. Rural schools share similarities with schools in metropolitan communities, but they also have many unique characteristics.

By way of definition, a community is considered “rural” when it has fewer than 2,500 residents. Accordingly, 39 percent of the schools in the Northwest are rural, compared to 31 percent nationally. Sixty-nine percent of Northwest region districts are rural, compared to 56 percent nationally. In addition to population, there are other factors that distinguish rural places from each other, as well

as from more urban settings (see sidebar on page 2). While there are challenging economic and social difficulties encountered in both rural and urban schools, it is important to use the small size and autonomy that characterize rural schools to best advantage in carrying out school improvement efforts.

For more than four decades, Education Northwest has partnered with rural communities and districts in its research, development, training, and technical assistance activities. From this experience we have distilled important lessons for working with rural schools. These lessons will benefit policymakers, researchers, and technical assistance providers who may be providing services to rural schools.

### Lesson # **1** Acknowledge and build on the creativity possible in rural settings.

Small, rural schools have several advantages that larger, more urban schools may envy. Smaller class sizes create a much more personalized environment for building relationships among students and staff. This also means that every student may have a greater opportunity to participate in a variety of learning and extracurricular activities. The small size of rural schools and communities creates opportunities—and often the need—for innovation that are not available to urban schools.

Because of limited access to outside resources, things get created, repaired, and accomplished in ingenious ways. Rural school organizations tend to be flat, which promotes a high degree of responsibility and autonomy in individual staff for solving problems. For example, a small K–8 school district in Montana created a comprehensive school health education curriculum by assigning one unit to each of the nine teachers, who developed lessons on that topic for all grade levels. In this way, the development task was equally distributed, the articulation of each theme was aligned across grade levels, and each staff member had a full calendar of lessons scheduled for the year.

### Lessons Learned in Leveraging the Unique Features of Small, Rural Schools for Improvement

1. Acknowledge and build on the creativity possible in rural settings.
2. Use data and research in ways that highlight context.
3. Use technology appropriately as one strategy to address the needs of students and staff.
4. Models for school improvement likely look a little different in small, remote communities than in other areas.
5. Don't underestimate the ability of rural schools to get things done.

## Understanding Rural Reality

It is not appropriate to characterize rural schools with a single, all-encompassing description.

**Some rural places are remote and isolated.** One in five Northwest rural schools is remote. That is, they are located a great distance from metropolitan centers where medical, educational, governmental, commercial, and entertainment facilities are located. Beyond distance, they may also be isolated by geography, weather, or modes of travel. This means that a “trip to town” for school personnel and community members may pose a particular challenge along with commensurate access to goods and services. It may take time to get equipment repaired or a specialist into the building. It may be a challenge to attract, hire, and house personnel.

**Some rural places are very small.** Northwest rural schools tend to be smaller than those in the nation as a whole. The average enrollment of our rural schools is 200. Nearly 700 of our schools have five or fewer teachers. While not all ru-

ral schools and districts have small enrollments, many do. This means a single teacher per grade level or even a single teacher per multiple grade levels. This also means the absence of specialized personnel, so everyone wears “multiple hats.” Consequently everyone is very, very busy juggling all of their duties, but with less bureaucracy. Not only do small places have a limited infrastructure, but they have a disproportionate burden of fixed costs coupled with financial fragility. It doesn’t take much to disrupt the system. Everything runs on a small scale. A curriculum specialist isn’t a job, but rather a part of someone’s job.

**Some, but not all, rural communities are economically distressed.** The average free and reduced-price lunch eligibility rate in our remote rural schools is more than 50 percent. Unemployment may be chronically high. Economic opportunity and diversification may be cyclical or marginal. Family income may be low. Abuse and neglect may be part of the social dynamic.

Some families may not have the communication, transportation, opportunity, and/or confidence necessary to participate in traditional school activities.

**Some rural places have well-established and ethnically unique cultural norms and traditions.** Rural places may have long family histories and strict religious or social norms different from more cosmopolitan perspectives, be they Indian reservation, Eskimo village, Hutterite colony, or company mill town. Things are done a certain way because traditionally that is how they have been done. These may be very stable places with a rich heritage. As one reservation sign states, “Welcome to our valley, where we have lived forever.” Outside consultants may not be readily welcomed since rural residents have dealt with a long line of well-intended, but ultimately unsuccessful experts from elsewhere.

Understanding the rural reality is key to helping make positive change occur for students and communities.

Those working with rural schools should acknowledge the creativity possible in such settings and challenge the staff to craft solutions that will result in school improvement. They should encourage them to communicate with schools similar to theirs to share ideas and compare results.

**Lesson # 2 Use data and research in ways that highlight context.** Because of the small enrollments in rural schools, means and standard deviations have limited value. A corollary to the small numbers issue is the problem of variability that is created when state

or federal policy dictates particular numbers or proportions as thresholds. One example of this is proficiency rates to achieve adequate yearly progress; another example is poverty rates for Title I eligibility. The difference of a single child can have a seemingly substantial effect on reported statistics. Aggregating results across years, grades, groups, or other conditions can help to “smooth” the variability of these quantitative data.

For example, staff members in some Oregon small schools are joining colleagues in neighboring districts to look at research through shared common readings and visits. Together, they determine the appro-

priateness of the findings for their specific settings.

Technical assistance providers are encouraged to find new ways to depict data in compelling and persuasive ways that accommodate these variations in numbers and averages. Further, a combination of words, numbers, and pictures can convey important messages about improvement plans and progress. Since context is important, consultants should encourage staff members to contrast their performance with those of similar size schools to gain perspective. Current technology enables schools and teachers to make comparisons of “schools like mine with kids like mine” to get a sense of relative success in atten-

dance, achievement, graduation rate, and college enrollment data.

**Lesson # 3 Use technology appropriately as one strategy to address the needs of students and staff.**

Distance learning and other communication technologies have made advances as a means for improving educational opportunities in rural school settings. While locally available, high-quality, face-to-face instruction is often preferred, electronic means of delivering professional development and instructional support may be necessary and viable options. Ensuring equal educational opportunity is a continuing challenge, particularly in remote areas, that can be addressed through a variety of creative means. For example, it is common for small districts to engage in cooperative agreements through educational service agencies or consortia to achieve an economy of scale to plan, purchase, and deliver area professional development or share a specialist across district lines. In another example, some schools and districts are turning to online providers or virtual high schools to offer foreign language, advanced mathematics, and other hard-to-staff courses.

Technical assistance providers should consider technology as one possible strategy to address student needs. But, less obvious strategies for providing learning opportunities may be possible as well. Human resources may exist within the local community or shared with neighboring communities to accomplish the desired learning goal.

**Lesson # 4 Models for school improvement likely look a little different in small, remote communities than in other areas.**

In places with few specialized personnel and limited, central office staff, planning and implementing improvements are more often accomplished by the total group through consensus, rather than committee. Because smaller office staffs are accustomed to taking on extra duties and assignments, specific activities can be assigned to individuals based on interest, availability, and expertise. Being small also means being more nimble. Things may get done quickly, but plans and reports are often less formal than those prepared by a large district. Yet, small also means that team performance is affected by less effective personnel and that staffing choices are limited.

Parents, the community, and the local school board will play instrumental roles in planning and conducting school improvement efforts. They can offer the extra helping hands, but more important, they can provide the continuity that sustains improvement efforts in rural schools.

Our school improvement work with small schools in the region explicitly requires school board participation in reviewing local data, gathering research evidence, and setting evidence-based priorities. This provides a process to model in order to sustain improvement efforts over time.

Improved instruction may likely play out through activities jointly planned by individual teachers and their students. The success of these efforts may be demonstrated by the use of portfolios and public presentations, as well as scores on state-wide assessments.

Small schools may benefit from flexibility that allows local design

and investment in solutions to meet recognized goals. Consultants should be inclusive when making task assignments and put more emphasis on immediate implementation than lengthy planning processes. They should frequently debrief with the team on what is being learned.

**Lesson # 5 Don't underestimate the ability of rural schools to get things done.**

Rural schools and communities face unexpected challenges and obstacles on a day-to-day basis and usually consider them to be routine. Simple, elegant remedies are common and taken for granted. While there may not be a lot of tolerance for paperwork or activities that are considered burdensome, staff will often get work done properly, on time, and with little complaint when given the rationale for specific tasks.

Because choices among alternatives are often limited in small, remote schools there is respect for those who step forward to fill a role or complete a task. For example, in one western Washington high school, students provide the leadership and human resources to carry out school, tribal, and community surveys that identify priorities for the superintendent and board. They design the survey, analyze data, and report findings—work that more deeply engages them in their school.

Consultants should use sound reasoning when challenging rural schools with high expectations. Discreet steps with reasonable time lines and expectations should characterize any improvement plan. Finally, we suggest that external providers remember to celebrate accomplishments along the way. Nonetheless, some rural schools will continue to struggle for a variety of reasons. Overcoming social,

financial, or leadership constraints can often be beyond the consultant's control.

## Summary

Equal opportunity means that every child, regardless of residence, has the right to a free, public education. Small, rural schools offer unique challenges and opportunities for providing this education. From time to time rural schools may either seek or be afforded outside expertise to improve schools. Knowing what advice to give—and how—requires a thorough understanding of the history and socioeconomic context of the school and community. Taking the time to learn about the local setting before offering advice is one way for outsiders to show respect for small school students and teachers. In order to be truly helpful, visiting consultants need to spend more time listening than speaking; capture successes in metaphorical ways through stories; remember that simple, obvious solutions are preferred; support flexible approaches to locally owned ideas; understand that resources are very limited; and hold high expectations.

*Since 1966, Education Northwest has carried out research and development work with rural schools across the region to capitalize upon their strengths to improve educational opportunities for their students. We partner with rural schools and communities on projects and activities that range from research to evaluation to technical assistance and training. Steve Nelson has directed the rural education program for more than 10 years, formulating pilot demonstration projects with the region's rural schools and teachers. For more information about these services, contact Steve Nelson at Steve.Nelson@educationnorthwest.org or 503.275.9547.*

Founded in 1966 as Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Education Northwest works with schools, districts, and communities on comprehensive, research-based solutions to the challenges they face. Four priorities frame our work: supporting educators; strengthening schools and districts; engaging families and communities; and conducting research, evaluation, and assessment. Watch for additional issues of *Lessons Learned*, a series that distills our experience and research, in the Resources section of [educationnorthwest.org](http://educationnorthwest.org).

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