

Rural Schools Need Realistic Improvement Models

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Abstract

Race to the Top's prescribed models for turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools are designed for urban areas and leave rural districts out of the high-stakes money game. This omission needs to be fixed.

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Now that Governor Ritter plans to reapply for Race to the Top's next round of federal education funds, the time is ripe to address a hole in Education Secretary Arne Duncan's grand plan for public school reform.

The competition's federal dollars could save many states and districts from financial ruin, but the prescribed models for turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools are designed for urban areas. Leaving rural districts out of the high-stakes money game hurt Colorado in the first funding round. This omission needs to be fixed.

Rural schools serve one out of five students in the United States (9 million in all) and account for an estimated one-third of the roughly 5,000 schools nationwide targeted for improvement. In Colorado, nearly half the state's 178 districts serve rural areas exclusively.

To take part in Race to the Top, states must identify their lowest-performing high-poverty schools. These schools qualify for millions in school improvement funds if they implement one of four reform models. Each district adopts the model it considers best suited to helping the failing school's performance. Trouble is, many districts serving rural areas fear nothing has been learned from No Child Left Behind's hit-or-miss reform strategies and consider the four urban-centric options poor fits.

Why? For starters, the Turnaround Model requires firing and replacing the school's principal and at least half the teachers. But teacher recruitment in rural areas is already hard because the pool of highly qualified teachers is usually smaller than in urban communities. Then too, small tight-knit rural communities resist blaming their school's poor performance on teachers who are also their friends and neighbors.

Similarly, the Restart Model requires low-achieving schools to shut down and then reopen as charter schools. But charter schools are against the law in such largely rural states as Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, North Dakota, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

Even where charter schools are legal, conversion is a hard sell in rural districts that have only one school serving each grade level—as many do. How likely is a rural district to turn over its only high school to independent managers? And, even if small towns are game, how many charter school operators are ready to move into small or geographically isolated communities?

The School Closure Model requires the failing school to shut down and send its students to higher-achieving schools in the same district. Fair enough (assuming the district has another school to send them to), but nearby schools may not be large enough to accept the dislocated students. Or they may be 30 miles away.

The Transformational Model might work for some rural Race to the Top participants. It requires the district to replace the failing school's principal plus institute such other new policies as comprehensive instructional reform, extended school days or years, and more teacher planning time.

Unfortunately for rural districts, though, effective replacement leaders may be even harder than effective teachers to find in sparsely populated places. In a pinch for leadership, some rural districts may simply shuffle principals around to qualify for the school improvement funds. Is that the transformation we are looking for?

Surprisingly, all the evidence on school turnaround still doesn't pinpoint proven ways to help low-performing schools. The Department of Education's own practice guide admits that much. Even less is known about what will work in rural settings. Washington is right to send a strong signal that it's serious about reform and that incremental changes won't do. But unrealistic models will only burn bridges to rural communities.

Both urban and rural communities want their kids to succeed. Both want to turn around their struggling schools. But it's no wonder that some rural districts have already reluctantly said no to this unprecedented

opportunity on the grounds that the treatment may do more harm than good.

Rural schools' unique settings require unique solutions, and Secretary Duncan should honor the recent request of 22 U.S. senators calling for just that. Why not permit rural schools to modify teacher compensation, school calendars, and classroom organization without prescribing staff turnover? Why not allow rural districts to develop their own Plan B as long as they show dramatic improvements to a school's low-performing culture and meet Race to the Top's financial guidelines?

Let's give rural districts a fighting chance to turn around their low-performing schools with much-needed federal funding. With viable Race to the Top options instead of ill-fitting urban hand-me-downs, many rural schools may emerge whole from the economic downturn. Better still, improved schools may become the economic engines for struggling rural communities in Colorado and across the country.

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