



Reporter

Volume 24, Number 1

September/October 2008

SCHOOLS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION, INC.

Attitude Determines Student Success in Rural Schools Study investigates Qualities of High-Achieving Schools

While most of the country focuses on ACT scores, student-teacher ratio and rigorous curriculum to increase student success, it may be the commitment to excellence that determines student achievement in rural schools. This is an overlooked, yet critical, factor when considering nearly half of American school districts are in rural areas, educating nearly 21 percent of all students.

Perri Applegate, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma K20 Center, recently investigated the qualities that differentiate a high-achieving school and low-achieving rural high school, focusing on high-poverty high schools with at least 51 percent of the population eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Applegate compared the scores on Oklahoma's Academic Performance Index, the state's annual school report of 367 Oklahoma high schools ranging from large, urban to small rural schools. She found no significant difference in achievement of rural schools and those in other settings.

Surprisingly, the top factors that did impact student achievement in urban high schools, ACT scores and dropout rates, did not determine student success in rural schools. Community involvement and the school's commitment to student excellence were the determining factors in whether a rural school was high- or low-achieving.

"In small-town America, the school and the community are dependent upon each other for success," said Applegate. In rural areas, schools tend to be the center of the community, acting as a gathering place and often social services. In larger towns, students have access to resources and support outside of their schools.

"Rural schools in the study listed the same factors as impacting student achievement: poverty, parental support, community, extracurricular activities and a caring school culture," said Applegate. "The difference between a high- or low-achieving rural school was how they -- both the school and the community -- met those challenges."

High-achieving schools had educators that embraced the role of being a rural teacher, which typically means

wearing many hats and being creative with necessary resources. The schools had shared and supportive leadership, empowered stakeholders to take leadership roles and did not accept the idea that students were destined to fail based on their address. As one rural teacher pointed out, "Intelligence isn't geographically based."

Other factors included parents and community members who support the teachers, or if necessary, the school enacted programs to increase support. Another key factor was high-achieving schools gave students many opportunities to connect their learning to the well-being of the community, reinforcing the school-community bond.

While affected by the same variables, low-achieving schools felt that being a rural school was a handicap for student achievement and the lack of resources was a burden to school administration and the community. This attitude reflected in the educational approach of the school and in the student's probability to go to college.

According to Applegate, these findings have serious implications beyond education. Research shows that schools can save communities. The success of one can determine the success or failure of the other.

"We can't assume that student success in all schools, large and small, is impacted by the same issues," said Applegate. "So the question becomes how do we help schools in their environment become successful?"

For rural schools, Applegate suggests preparation programs need to provide specialized training for those who will serve in this setting. Policymakers need to acknowledge that rural schools have particular strengths and weaknesses. Finally, reform programs aimed at improving rural schools need to be tailored to meet their unique needs.



For more information on the study, contact Perri Applegate, (405) 325-1267 or email perri@ou.edu or to download the study, go to <http://k20network.ou.edu/university/research/studies>

Public Relations Message



Special Education Task Force

During the past few legislative sessions a number of bills have been introduced that would have changed the way special education services were funded. Last summer an Autism Task Force started meeting. They were successful in getting legislation passed that offered some additional assistance for families of autistic children. A group of parents of Dyslexic children also had an impact by purposing legislation that was heavily debated and succeeded in passing in the House. With special education in the spotlight, SB531 was passed. It addressed changes from the previous year in how Medicaid dollars were distributed in Kansas school districts and also established a Special Education Task Force. The intent of this task force is to determine how special education dollars differ from the general education funding formula and investigate a variety of funding options presently in use across the country. After gathering input they are charged with making recommendations on how these funds might be better distributed. It was understood that the groups' recommendations would follow an extensive study that would include hearings that were open to teachers, parents, the State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, other governmental agencies and departments and the general public. The task force was charged with submitting yearly reports to the legislature at the beginning of each session, until it ceases to exist on June 30, 2011.

As the house and senate worked to establish the task force there was much discussion on the make up of the group and who would appoint the members. Finally it was determined that there should be twelve members including the Commissioner of Education who would serve in a non-voting capacity. Other members, where they are from and who appointed them are: Representative Clay Aurand (Courtland)- Speaker of the House, Representative Gene Rardin (Overland Park)-House Minority Leader, Mr. Mike Lewis (Ulysses)-Senate President, Dr. Tim Wurtz (Topeka)-Senate Minority Leader, Ms. Lori Hisle (Blue Valley)- KASB, Ms. Mary Anne Trickle (Salina)-KASB, Ms. Glennys Doane (Waconda) – KASB, Dr. Rob Balsters (Topeka) USA, Dr. Neil Gurthrie (Wichita)-USA, Bert Moore (West Elk) USA, Dr. Wade Anderson (Topeka) KNEA. At the initial meeting in August, Commissioner Alexa Posny was elected chairman of the task force and Bert Moore was elected vice-chairman.

In the coming months the Special Education Task Force is likely to consider five basic types of funding formulas that are presently used all over the country. The most popular formula, the pupil based, is used in 19 states. This kind of formula allocates aid on a per pupil basis. It provides more funding for higher cost

students. The funding weights are differentiated based on student placement, student disability categories or some combination of the two.

The second most widely used formula, census based, is being used in ten states. Under this approach a fixed amount is applied to all students. This approach looks at the total school age population and implies a fixed identification rate across districts. Funding is not tied to special education counts, disability types, categories of services or other student characteristics. Some states such as California allow some adjustments for poverty levels and degree of severity. There are no adjustments in the census-based approach as it is used in North Dakota. Both Commissioner Posny and Dr. Jay Chambers, an expert from the American Institute for Education, express support for this method if it was properly funded, because there is less likelihood of over identification.

Seven states use either the resource-based or percentage reimbursement approaches. Resource-based funding is based on teacher units, classroom units or staffing rations. The funding is based on implied resource costs. With the percentage based funding approach, funds are based on actual expenditures. Predetermining what costs are allowable and setting an overall cap on identification rates are key to keeping expenses in line.

A fifth consideration used in four states, is the variable block grants. Funds are distributed on a per-pupil basis or enrollment shares with adjustments made based on growth in enrollment, state revenues and inflation. Three states use other methods such as full cost reimbursement.

In the initial meeting of the Special Education Task Force, Dr. Chambers suggested a review of each approach. He suggested to the group that many criteria should be considered to be sure it is the most appropriate approach. The best funding formula should meet 14 criteria. It should be fiscally accountable, understandable, equitable, predictable and flexible. It should also be identification neutral, cost-based, cost controlled, placement neutral, linked to regular education funding, politically acceptable, and it should present a reasonable reporting burden. Of all these considerations, the two missing in virtually all states are a clear definition of adequacy and goals of what is expected to be achieved. With a vision of adequate school funding in an overall sense, subsequent attention would be directed to special education needs. With a formula that defines adequacy for special education, it is more likely that a more integrated approach of special education and general education programs would be established in more states. This could result in cost controls that policy makers often feel are needed and in turn they might be more willing to provide the appropriate financial support.

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The 100th NREA Convention and Annual Rural Symposium

Reserve October 25-26 for the Annual Research Symposium and October 27-29 for the 100th National Rural Education Association Convention (NREA). The convention features exhibits, professional development sessions, awards, NREA Foundation Auction, and general sessions. Ed Barlow (futurist), LaDonna Gatlin (motivator and entertainer), Noelle Ellerson (AASA lobbyist), and Toddy Byrd (humorist) will make presentations during the general sessions. This year's events are being held at the Omni at the Colonnade in San Antonio, Texas. To register for the meetings and reserve rooms, please link to NREA website at <http://www.nrea.net>.

Ten Reasons Small Schools Positively Impact Students and their Learning

The report, *The Hobbit Effect: Why Small Works in Public Schools* from the Rural School and Community Trust, identifies ten research-based attributes of small schools that are proven to have a positive impact on kids and their learning. These elements are either normally found in most small schools or are more common in smaller schools than in larger schools. In the report, author Lorna Jimerson explores the evidence of each element's impact and why it confers advantages on children. Among the attributes identified are: greater participation in extra-curricular activities, increased school safety, smaller class size, and wider grade-span configurations.

Jimerson found that small schools intrinsically foster close relationships that not only help children feel connected to the school community and reduce alienation, especially among older students, but also lead to increased student learning. The close relationships inherent in small schools also have a positive impact on educators. For example, teachers in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, have less absenteeism, and take more responsibility for ensuring that their students are successful in school.

Jimerson says the research evidence clearly documents that efforts underway in some states to consolidate small schools (and small districts) are unnecessary, irrational, and imprudent. Far from improving student learning, these actions will divert energy and focus from effective school reform and will wrench children from community-centered schools that have the most likelihood of meeting their needs. "Rather than eradicating small schools, policymakers would be wise to invest in small schools and elements that make them effective and recognize that smallness is not a curse, but a blessing," says Jimerson.



From *Rural Schools and Community Trust*
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Commissioner Posny has indicated that the task force could have their final recommendations as early as the start of the 2009 legislative session. The next hearing is scheduled for September 22, 2008. Rural school districts and cooperatives will want to be sure they have a voice in the coming meetings.



Val DeFever
Public Relations Representative

Are Children Worth More Than One Penny

Over the past five years only one penny of every new, real non-defense dollar spent by the federal government goes to children, a new publication by First Focus, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization.

The book, entitled *Children's Budget 2008*, was made possible with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. It is an analysis of the over 180 federally funded programs that are aimed at enhancing the well-being of our nation's children, and how their appropriations levels have changed over the past five years. The key findings of the report include:

- For the past five years, only one penny of every new, non-defense dollar spent by the federal government has gone to children and children's programs.
- Children's spending now makes up only ten percent of the entire non-defense budget.
- The overall share of federal, non-defense spending going to children's programs has dropped by 10 percent over the past five years.
- Real discretionary spending on children has declined by more than 6 percent since 2004, while at the same time all other non-defense discretionary spending has increased by more than 8 percent.

The report also shows that over the past five years, spending on children's education has been stagnant, resulting in a real decrease in the value of education funding. Further, nearly 70 education programs have suffered real cuts over the past five years, leading to a 10 percent funding decrease, in real terms.

"One penny out of every new dollar is not sufficient for our nation's children," Lesley added. "As the 2008 elections approach, voters should hold politicians accountable by ensuring that the percentage of expenditures on kids does not continue plunging downward. It's time to invest in our nation's future and to once again make children a national priority."

For complete report go to
<http://www.firstfocus.net/pages/3391/>

Mark Your Calendar

SQE Issues Caucus and Annual Meeting

Saturday, December 6, 2008
7:30-8:45 a.m. Breakfast
Hyatt Regency Hotel
Wichita, KS



**Reservations are required.
Details will be sent to your districts
in November.**

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