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The Resilient Rural Leader

Rising to the Challenges
of Rural Education





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Introduction: The Unique Nature of Rural Education

City people make the most fuss about the charms of country life.

Mason Cooley

When I tell people that I am the superintendent of a rural school district, they respond in various ways. They often remark how difficult it must be, given the lack of resources in rural areas. Sometimes they bring up difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools. Increasingly, after the COVID-19 pandemic, they ask questions about access to technology and broadband for the students in my district. Some have asked when I plan to move to a larger urban district, now that I’ve “done my time” in rural education (spoiler alert: I have no plans or desire to!). And sometimes the “rural” part of my work in education is simply glossed over or not acknowledged at all. To be fair, colleagues who live and work in suburban or urban communities may not comprehend the concept of “rurality” and the many facets it entails. Part of what makes my job enjoyable, and part of the challenge of leading a rural district, is the opportunity to lay the foundation for understanding the barriers and innovations inherent in rural school districts.

Even I, when I was a new leader in a rural district, had misconceptions about what rural was and was not. Although I had been a rural student, and then a rural teacher and principal, I did not yet have a clear picture of the full

scope of rural school district leadership. When I was hired by my governing board in 2012, no resources focusing specifically on rural places and people were available to use as a framework. This lack forced me to draw from urban-centric leadership resources, being creative with the tools at hand in my community, and drove me to create networks of support that I still tap into when I run into a new issue or concern.

For example, when massive school closures in response to the pandemic prompted a shift to online learning environments, many of us felt like we were new leaders all over again. Rural leaders in my area and state banded together to support each other and share ideas for addressing teaching and learning, community concerns, home-based trauma, and the fear of the unknown. These connections highlighted for me the importance of our communities of practice and the necessity for rural communities to apply others' successes to our own context. The pandemic-inspired innovation happening all over the country was not a new phenomenon in rural schools! Rural leaders typically have to think about problems and their solutions differently than other school leaders. The "duct tape and baling wire" approach is often the best solution to a rural education problem.

The word "rural" does not call to mind the same scenario for everyone. Rural places in the high desert of the Arizona borderlands, where I was both a student and a teacher, differ greatly from the woods of rural Maine, the Badlands of the Dakotas, or the wilds of Alaska. Not only are the locales varied, but the people who choose to live and work in a rural place and the assets that the rural community can provide are astoundingly diverse. The term "rural" is often used to refer to anything that is not urban, but rural is not a monolithic description. The context of a place has an impact on its people and its way of life—and, as this book explores in depth—context is vital to developing innovative solutions to rural challenges.

Yes, I Am a Rural Educator

My family moved from the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, to Douglas, Arizona, on the border between the United States and Mexico, when I was a preteen. I experienced, firsthand and in living color, the differences between rural and nonrural places and people. The only non-Hispanic student in my class, I attended school in Douglas, where the lessons were six months or more behind those taught in my private school in Chicago. The classroom resources and

even the buildings were older and in need of updating. When we subsequently moved an hour north to Sierra Vista, Arizona, I experienced a different rural environment and school setting. The traditions, the culture, and the issues of both locations had commonalities, but they were not identical. As they say, if you have seen one rural school, you have seen one rural school!

I have been an educator for more than 30 years at a variety of levels: in the classroom, as a site-level administrator, and as superintendent for the last 13 years. I served all of that time in rural schools and districts. The appeal of being part of a rural school community is difficult to quantify. For me, making connections with students and their families outside school is rewarding, though it sometimes impinges on privacy! The Rural Schools Collaborative and National Rural Education Association (n.d.) have developed an excellent promotional campaign celebrating rural teachers at <https://iamaruralteacher.org>. The platform, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, communicates why the unique rewards of rural teaching are truly a draw for many.

So why does it matter that some people understand rurality, and others do not? In the last 15 years, there has been an increase in conversation around rural issues, people, and places. The contributions of rural voters to the 2016 U.S. presidential election were heavily scrutinized, with the predominant media narrative characterizing rural voters as largely white, uneducated farmers. This is certainly not the case! While it is important that awareness of and consideration for rural issues are being raised, if the public's understanding of such issues is only surface-level and based in erroneous beliefs, policymakers and others with decision-making authority may effect unintentional harm to rural communities. It is vital that rural educators tell their stories about the challenges and barriers they face and share the innovations developed in response to that adversity. Not only might sharing spark ideas for educational solutions in all types of settings, but it can also ensure that rural concerns are a part of decision making at all levels. In an era of increasing political polarization, which often influences educational issues, a basic understanding of rural education can highlight how leaders in all locales can benefit from each other's insights and successes.

What Does Rural Mean?

Most people have a stereotypical concept of rural communities based on movies, books, social media, or what they have heard from friends. Friday

night football game attended by the whole town? High school students making bad decisions down by the river after the game? Sitting on the porch with lemonade while Grandpa waxes poetic about the good ol' days? While my own experiences growing up in a rural community included two of the three, it's important to note that there is no template that applies to all such communities. Rurality is context-driven. Rural places exist in almost every state and are so varied and complex that it's difficult to create a single, inclusive definition for them. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses 15 different definitions of "rural" to determine which localities receive federal dollars (*The Washington Post*, 2013).

This lack of understanding makes sense in light of U.S. Census Bureau (America Counts Staff, 2017) reports that only one in five Americans live in a rural area, despite such areas making up almost 97 percent of the country's land mass (leaving the 80 percent of Americans who live in urban areas to reside on only 3 percent of the available land). To further complicate the issue, the U.S. Census Bureau does not define what rural *is*, but rather quantifies what it *is not*. It's no wonder that the definition of "rural" lacks consensus. Regional differences; local economic industries; racial, ethnic, and cultural variances; and proximity to urban resources all have an impact on rural spaces, preventing the generalization of attributes assigned to a community that calls itself rural.

Some interesting shifts in population are also affecting rural communities. While the total rural population percentage is down from almost 25 percent in 1990, research by The Aspen Institute (Community Strategies Group, 2019) points out that there are nuances to that statistic. They note that certain rural areas in the country have actually shown growth, while the migration of residents from suburban and urban areas to rural areas has caused many places formerly identified as rural to be reclassified.

To get further into the weeds, we should break down different types of rural. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.c) designates locale codes based on the proximity of an area to an urban cluster with a population of between 2,500 and 50,000. There are three locale codes used for rural education:

- **41: Fringe.** Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

- **42: Distant.** Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- **43: Remote.** Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (NCES, n.d.c)

My rural district is classified as “distant,” as we are within 20 miles of an urbanized area to both the east and west. The locale code of an area is an important distinction because it is attached to federal grant dollars that can be applied to innovations. Locale codes can also be integral to putting together a teacher recruitment and retention plan.

The American Rural Education System

The education system in America has deep rural roots. If you research the oldest operating school in your state or region, it’s likely that it was a rural school, at least at the start! In truth, many one-room or small schoolhouses have historically served students in both large agricultural areas and small towns. According to NCES (2017), of the 88,835 schools across the United States, 25,188 serve rural students—and each of these schools taps into strengths that are unique to their location.

One of the things I tell policymakers about my district is that the school serves as the hub of the community. Given the distance to services, government buildings, and retail stores, it is the optimal place for the area’s residents to congregate. (One could argue that the Cow Town Bar could also fill that role, but that’s a different book!) Rural schools are typically one of the largest employers in their area as well, acting as an economic driver. And finally, our school is the recipient of the largest share of local taxes. Without our school, the community would be in danger of dying—and my district is not unique in these community connections.

Even though rural schools have long been important to their communities, in the mid-20th century, fewer rural students graduated high school than their urban counterparts. Because educational attainment is directly correlated to the economic prosperity of a community, this disparity leads to problematic circumstances. While the percentage of high school graduation

from rural schools has shown growth, the gains have been variable. In 2000, the percentage of urban students who graduated high school and went on to some type of postsecondary education was 53.9; by 2019, it had grown to 63.2. In the same time frame, the proportion of rural high school graduates pursuing higher education grew from 40.2 percent to 51.4 percent (USDA, 2021).

In their report *Rural Education at a Glance, 2017 Edition*, the USDA Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2017) notes that rural Americans are more educated than ever and describes the following trends affecting rural communities and schools:

- **Educational attainment in rural areas is on the rise.** Research shows that while more than half of rural students graduated with a high school diploma or passed the GED in 1970, the graduation rate is now 85 percent. However, this rate varies according to student demographics.
- **The urban-rural gap in college degree attainment increased from 11 percent in 2000 to 14 percent in 2015.** This trend may be attributed to the rural “brain drain” that communities experience when rural students choose to reside in nonrural areas after completing their degree, often due to higher wages offered for skilled and educated workers.
- **Rural women are increasingly more educated than rural men,** with a gap of 2 percent more women completing college degrees than men from 2000 to 2015. The same time frame showed no gender difference in college completion in urban areas.
- **Educational attainment is lower for rural minority and ethnic students than for their white peers.** This disparity causes growing concern as rural America becomes increasingly diverse.

The innovations presented in this book address such trends while offering ways to overcome barriers for rural students and their school communities.

Rural Is Not a Monolith

Recently, my rural district revitalized our mission and vision by focusing our view of who we are as a school community and how we serve the community at large on three basic ideas:

- We are a family.
- We are academically focused.
- We are whole-child centered.

We are also a values-driven organization that is informed by data. These tenets, based on identified strengths of our district, were created by staff and community members invested in the school who value what the school provides for both local children and community residents. They are also a way for the school to showcase our contextual assets.

Rural schools are typically not imbued with the same levels of resources that schools in suburban and urban districts might be able to tap for support. Infrastructure issues, employee housing concerns, technology barriers, declining enrollment leading to fiscal impact, and aging buildings and facilities are just some of the difficult realities that rural leaders face. Despite such challenges, rural schools across the country generate outstanding examples of ingenuity and accomplishment.

I have explained that rural education is not monolithic. Rural educational offerings depend on the nature of the assets, resources, and professionals available to the schools. One community may have access to broadband, while another might not have any type of internet service available—and won't for years to come. Some rural schools employ educators who grew up attending the schools in which they now teach, while others have to think in new ways to attract teachers to their community. The assets that a rural education leader can tap into also vary from place to place. It is imperative that the leader be able to identify strengths of the rural areas they serve and leverage these resources, programs, or initiatives to promote positive outcomes for the school and its stakeholders. Understanding that innovations are driven out of necessity and crafted with the tools at hand is at the heart of rural education. Later, this book will go deeper into how the local community and what it offers play a part in the success of the rural school in myriad ways, including staff retention, place-based education, and closure decisions.

Rural Native or Rural Immigrant?

My experiences growing up in rural communities have benefited me in my different roles during my career. I know about pitfalls, such as neglecting to build relationships or talking to the wrong person about an issue, and I know how to negotiate with and enlist members of the local community to support school programming and initiatives. Research has shown that educators often end up teaching close to where they grew up (McArdle, 2019). It's important that educators from nonrural areas who are considering working in a rural school be aware of the challenges of transitioning to a rural way of life.

One common issue for educators newly arrived in a rural community is the diminished professional support that is a characteristic of small rural schools. With everyone wearing multiple hats, a mentoring program may not be available, and if it is, it may not be formally structured or led by trained personnel. Additionally, there may be a lack of academic or professional support both within grade levels and vertically from grade to grade. If the school district consists of a single site, there may not even be the opportunity to bring together staff from multiple campuses for collaboration. These limitations can lead to stagnation and a discouraging lack of drive to try new things.

Another circumstance that can take newly rural staff by surprise is the lack of resources available for instruction and initiatives. Whether due to a depressed tax base, the inability to secure grant funding, or dwindling local industry opportunities, resource scarcity is often a concern in rural communities. The structure of school funding in different states may also have an impact on the fiscal vitality of rural schools and what resources they are able to provide. It is vital for rural leaders to know and be able to advocate effectively on policy issues related to rural education.

The location of a rural area and the distance to amenities like shopping and entertainment often affect basic living conditions. Limitations on housing, whether in terms of affordability or available stock, are another potential barrier to recruiting nonrural staff. Many rural districts must provide employee housing or offer it as a benefit to attract candidates. Younger employees relocating to unfamiliar areas can feel isolated and lack social peers, especially in remote areas, which can lead to high employee turnover. Even restricted access to healthcare can be a hardship that can outweigh the benefits of living in rural places.

To counter these obstacles, I encourage those already in rural schools or considering working in them to explore the strengths of rural America. Spending time to expand one's understanding of rural places and people is worth the effort. Given the wide variety of rural localities that serve the nearly 9 million students, many candidates can find appealing positions outside of suburban and urban areas. The key is to recognize misconceptions about rurality and embrace the differences found in rural schools as the opportunities they are. It comes down to the fact that all communities want the same things for their children, no matter what type of locale they call home.

Looking Ahead

With so many students learning in rural areas of the country, it is hard to overlook the importance of investigating their educational journeys and exploring the lessons they can teach us. In response to barriers and challenges, rural educators are implementing a range of innovations to address the needs of their community. When shared between other leaders, these new ways of looking at issues can spark solutions that spread success beyond rural schools. This is not old wine in new bottles but rather new thinking to address problems both perennial and novel.

Rural school leadership has much in common with urban school leadership. However, in most rural schools, the filling of leadership roles depends on available personnel and their strengths. Often, the superintendent of a rural district is also a school principal. Because these varied responsibilities require diverse skill sets, mentoring, professional development, and collaboration with other rural leaders are key. Chapter 1 examines the many hats a rural leader must wear and how they have an impact on success filling those roles. It also explores laying the groundwork for an effective working relationship with a district's governing board and the importance of being a rural advocate. The chapter also identifies support networks that can assist with the varied duties and responsibilities of a rural leader.

Chapter 2 begins a deep dive into rural challenges and rural innovations, starting with teacher recruitment and retention. After examining this challenge and sharing some innovative solutions found across the country, the chapter offers practical strategies for creating recruitment plans, marketing effectively, using creative scheduling, and keeping teachers under contract.

We know that strong leaders create strong schools. However, there is an ever-growing problem keeping the pipeline to rural principalship flowing. Chapter 3 probes this problem, analyzing the current state of the pipeline and its gaps. It also dives into what rurality means for rural newcomers, the challenges related to finding professional development for leaders, and how stress is a factor in leader turnover. You will then be presented with strategies to secure the leadership pipeline in your community, including how to build “grow-your-own” programming and mentor and support rural leaders.

Chapter 4 focuses on enhancing the effectiveness of rural school leaders, who are called on to fill a multitude of roles. Strong organization and time

management skills are a must for those tasked with both being an instructional leader and managing a school site. The chapter presents relevant strategies along with frameworks for decision making.

Chapter 5 addresses limitations of access to amenities in rural communities—disparities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its societal effects. The chapter discusses these access pain points and offers innovative solutions for challenges such as broadband internet access, food insecurity, inadequate medical care, and lack of housing. You will learn about strategies such as telehealth and school-based clinics, grant funding opportunities, and examples of how rural leaders across the country have successfully filled access gaps.

Poverty afflicts students in all types of communities. However, the impact of poverty on rural students varies as a function of the availability of services and resources. Chapter 6 investigates rural poverty and suggests solutions that leaders may be able to implement, such as trauma-informed care and positive youth development programs. It also presents ways to determine how well a program fits the local context.

Chapter 7 takes a look at the increasingly rich diversity found in rural places across the country. It examines what diversity, equity, and inclusion look like in a rural setting and offers strategies to address barriers, such as innovations in providing underrepresented students with access to higher education and ways to meet the needs of Native American and multilingual and English language learners.

One of the most devastating things that can happen in a rural community is the closure or consolidation of its school. Chapter 8 explores the impact of the death of a local rural school and investigates possible ways to head off a restructuring. The chapter also outlines practical steps to ensure that the loss of the school does not destroy the community.

Rural flight—also called “brain drain”—is an issue for many rural communities. What can be done to mitigate the migration of young professionals out of these locations? How can a rural school and the surrounding community attract rural native adults back to the area? Chapter 9 describes the effects of the loss of this vital community asset and provides strategies rural leaders can use to grow the community at large, along with two powerful tools: rural needs assessments and rural asset mapping.

For Further Exploration

Throughout this book, you will find references to a variety of online materials you may use to further investigate the content of each chapter. These materials can serve as a starting point for conversations at the local level, a toolkit for a particular activity or effort within your rural school community, or a deeper dive into a concept or idea. To assist with ease of access, I have created a companion website at www.velaconsultants.com to collate these resources and offer additional ones to help you navigate your rural leadership journey. You can also contact me directly through the website to get specific support and information.

Now let's dive into the heart of the book and take a look at some insights and strategies that will help empower you in your role as the rural leader in your school community!



1

The Rural School Leader

There Is No Typical Rural Leader

One of the challenges of rural leadership—and counterintuitively, one of its opportunities—is the diversity of roles and responsibilities encompassed in the job of the head honcho of a rural school system. Across the country, many rural superintendents also serve as principal. Some superintendents may oversee a principal or two while being in charge of the fiscal functions of the district. In some areas, the superintendent shares the responsibility for certain district- or school-level functions with a lead teacher. Whatever the configuration, one thing is certain: there’s no such thing as “typical” when it comes to rural education leaders. Just as rural communities vary from one to another, the shape of shared leadership depends on the context of the system. Often, the skills of the individuals in the system determine who fills what role—and sometimes a role is thrust upon someone by default because there’s no one else available.

No matter the background of the educator leading a rural school community, it’s highly unlikely they came to the job knowing everything they needed to know. College-level programs often fail to convey the holistic view of leadership needed for success in such a role. And while no one expects preparation programs to teach it all, letting these leaders flounder while they grow and refine their skills can lead to frustration, anxiety, and burnout. This chapter fills in some gaps for both novices and veterans by focusing on some of the most prominent aspects of rural school leadership, suggesting useful

tools, and discussing how to amplify your advocacy efforts. To draw a distinction between district-level and school-level leadership, we will use the term “superintendent” for those aspects of rural leadership that deal with responsibilities tied to the district office, and “principal” to refer to leadership roles on a school campus.

The Rural Superintendent

When I am asked how I “do it all” in my role as superintendent/business manager, my immediate response is that I live by my calendar—thank goodness for Google! Many aspects of the superintendency are the same for large and small, rural and urban districts no matter where they are located. However, some areas bring unique challenges to the position, chief among them the multitude of demands and responsibilities placed on a rural leader. Shepherding state and federal requirements, managing local politics, and ensuring effective teaching and learning are just a few broad categories in which such demands fall. In contrast with larger districts, where multiple departments and personnel handle these varied and often siloed responsibilities, rural settings usually lack this depth of human capital. In fact, rural organization charts are often fairly flat!

Nevertheless, we can identify some commonalities across most rural superintendencies. Let’s take a closer look at these aspects.

Serving at the Will of the Governing Board

One of the professors involved with my doctoral work said something about school leadership that stuck with me: “You are only one vote away from either having or not having a contract, and you should remember you work at the will of the board.” To be an effective rural leader, you should have a thorough comprehension of the main responsibilities of the school district’s governing board:

- **The governing board represents the community.** Because the board is elected by local citizens, they are obliged to consider the desires of the electorate. It is their responsibility to attend to community input when they make decisions. School leaders’ interactions with the board must be based on an understanding of the district’s strengths and weaknesses so that they can make recommendations relevant to the community’s resources, personnel, and student needs.

- **The governing board sets policy.** Whether in response to legislative action, state board of education decrees, or other policy drivers, the board is responsible for establishing expectations for district operations. School leaders must ensure that these policies are carried out in the manner in which they were intended. Get to know the policy manual! The guideposts found therein often can prevent lack of control or direction.
- **The governing board makes decisions about hiring and firing but directly oversees only one employee.** Even in small rural and remote districts, the only employee the board manages is the leader they have selected to take on the superintendent responsibilities. Boards in rural areas sometimes struggle with “staying in their lane” with regard to management responsibility. School leaders must be aware that a lack of clearly defined roles in this area can lead to conflict that is detrimental to the effective and efficient running of the organization.
- **The governing board monitors the district’s fiscal performance.** No matter the size of the budget or how it is expended, the board is accountable for ensuring that taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly on the needs and goals of the school community. From approving routine budgets to facilitating major procurements, the board oversees the financial health of the district. School leaders must be familiar with policies that govern the district’s fiscal obligations, which can be challenging. Many rural education leaders lack a financial background and have had very little training in education accounting and planning in their preparation for the field. The best advice that I received during my superintendent internship was to make friends with the financial manager of the district. Close attention to and deep understanding of the district’s fiscal requirements are crucial to being a successful school leader.
- **The governing board assesses the performance and progress of the school system.** The board’s multifaceted assessment includes data from student academic performance, financial audits, personnel performance reviews, and levels of community satisfaction. School leaders must be well versed in each of these indicators, able to communicate data to the board, and ready to recommend appropriate actions to improve the system. Such communication ensures that the board can see the big picture of the district so that they can keep it running smoothly and moving forward—often by making hard decisions.

Because school leaders constantly make decisions on behalf of the board, it is good to have a working knowledge of the roles each entity plays. Figure 1.1 outlines a standard division of responsibilities.

FIGURE 1.1

Roles and Responsibilities of Governing Boards and Superintendents

Role/Responsibility	Governing Board	Superintendent
General	Governs the district	Manages the district, advises the board
Policy	Adopts	Recommends, implements
Board meetings	Responsible for	Assists in running
Budget/finance	Adopts, monitors	Prepares, administers, monitors
Instruction	Establishes criteria, approves	Recommends, oversees
Personnel	Approves or rejects based on established criteria	Interviews, recommends, evaluates, develops
Community relations	Creates positive image	Assists with image, communicates
Labor relations	Provides guidelines, ratifies contracts	Monitors process
Student services	Adopts policies	Recommends, implements, directs
Facilities/food service/ transportation	Develops and adopts policy	Implements policy, writes procedures, recommends

Source: Adapted from Idaho Public Charter School Commission, 2013.

Ensuring Fiscal Responsibility

A major aspect of the role of superintendent relates to assisting the governing board with their fiduciary task of spending taxpayer dollars efficiently, effectively, and legally. This responsibility may be daunting for rural leaders who have little or no background in school finance. When I was offered the superintendent job in Stanfield, Arizona, where I would oversee budgeting, directing grants, and all other fiscal aspects of running the district, one of the first things I did was to ask the previous superintendent if she was willing to

mentor me to address my lack of business background; she graciously acquiesced. I remember having to admit not knowing basic accounting information, which was humbling, but I now know that I am certainly not alone in having to overcome the challenge of dealing with school finances as a rural leader.

Most education leadership preparation programs do include some component of finance studies, but they are typically only one-semester, high-altitude overviews of the mechanics of education funding, the human resources aspect of budgeting, and maybe some of the politics that surround the flow of monies to schools. What I needed to know was how to manage funds—cost containment, reallocation of resources, how and where to make cuts, and long-term plans for enrollment fluctuation. Knowing how to strategize around district funds is vital to rural school leadership—so I learned. The following are some best practices that help me and other rural leaders to be effective fiscal agents.

Know how your state's funding system works. Without a sound operational knowledge of how your district's funding is determined and allocated by the state legislature, it is impossible to plan ahead. Budgets operate concurrently; at any given point in the fiscal year, I am working with three annual budgets—current, prior, and proposed. I cannot project or close out budgets if I don't know where the revenues are coming from or what expenditures I can plan. In addition, I am mindful that my recommendations to the board regarding tax levies have direct implications for the community. I strongly encourage new rural leaders to develop a working knowledge of school finance, even if they are not directly responsible for such decisions. Being able to speak to the board, the community, or the staff about the district's fiscal operations is an important skill to acquire. If there are no local experts to network with, look for workshops or contact your state business officials organization to connect with resources that can help.

If possible, increase funding by enrolling students from outside the district attendance zone. In my rural district, where enrollment is declining, we register almost any student who walks through the door. Arizona is an “open enrollment” state, but even before legislation was passed to expand that opportunity for students and their families, out-of-district enrollments were the only way to maintain or even build our population. It may sound slightly opportunistic, but the only way we can increase our funding is by serving more students. Almost 20 percent of my district's students live outside our boundaries; their inclusion makes a huge difference in the budget. It also makes marketing to attract new families an important part of my job as superintendent.

Master effective personnel management. Predicting staffing needs and patterns and responding proactively is key to a district's operational bottom line. The first year that I was a superintendent I had to eliminate some positions to operate within the parameters of the projected budget. While not an enjoyable process by any stretch, cutting staff, combining duties where appropriate, and tapping into contracted service providers and shared service arrangements were all ways to increase the efficiency of the budget. Key to effective personnel management is the recruitment and retention of quality staff, which will be highlighted in Chapter 2.

Get savvy with spending. Whether through using purchasing cooperatives, regional service centers, or agreements with surrounding districts that create economies of scale, being bullish on spending is a must. The first and most important place a rural leader can run into trouble is mismanagement of the district's finances. Being able to report to the board and the community where funds are expended and why can go a long way to establishing credibility in leadership. Because district budgets are subject to public review, consider hosting financial workshops to help community and board members understand the process and your execution of it. Effectively controlling the funding you manage is key to being a successful administrator.

Turn the lights off. You would think, being located in Arizona, my district would have taken advantage of our almost daily sunshine by installing solar panels. It's a shame we haven't, since that would certainly reduce how much money we spend on electricity! To look for cost savings, I had an energy audit done on our facilities. The results inspired some measures to improve energy efficiency such as replacing outdated ballast lighting with LEDs, replacing older HVAC units, and expanding our preventative maintenance plans beyond just a hurried checklist completed at the end of each year. Other practices to reduce energy consumption include automated timers for lighting, governor mechanisms on heating and cooling units, and water usage reduction. These initiatives seem like small things, but they can add up to big overall savings.

Know your federal programs and grants. Federal funding and grant opportunities support a variety of programming at both the district and building levels. For example, legislation regarding funding for English language learners and immigrant students (Title III), disadvantaged students (Title I), effective teacher preparation (Title II, Part A), and Indigenous students can facilitate opportunities for students and staff that might otherwise be out of reach for your district. Connect with your state department of education,

which typically serves as the pass-through organization for these monies, to learn more and to take advantage of any available training and support for obtaining and managing these types of funding.

Expand your options. Strategies to increase district revenues or reduce expenditures include the following:

- Use outside vendors or consultants to fill gaps in background knowledge. My office works with an accountant to augment my more limited financial knowledge with professional expertise in budgeting and fiscal management.
- Become a member of various organizations and associations connected with school finance. Two that I find helpful are the Government Finance Officers Association (www.gfoa.org) and the Association of School Business Officials International (<https://asbointl.org>). I also belong to my state's school business officials association. Networking within these organizations can also connect you with other resources and avenues of support.
- Find a mentor knowledgeable about school finance to meet with on an as-needed basis.
- Conduct an audit of the district's various operations, including transportation, food service, human resources, energy use, and purchasing. Use the results to identify and mitigate areas of concern to prevent unnecessary expenditures.
- Develop a relationship with your legislative representatives and conduct advocacy work in the area of school finance.
- Implement an equity audit to ensure that funding is being spent in a way that provides equal opportunity and access for all students in your district.
- Train other staff responsible for portions of the budget (e.g., facilities manager, food service director) and ensure they have access to needed status reports on revenues and expenditures.
- Check the return on investment for all the programs and resources your district uses. Are the resources having a positive effect on desired outcomes for your student and staff populations? If not, consider restructuring to maximize the impact of your limited funding.

No matter how you plan and execute fiscal policy and procedure, remain mindful that the process needs to be done in collaboration with the

community and staff and should be transparent. Multiple opportunities for input and regular communication on what is being considered, what is being done, and what the outcomes are will help ensure your district thrives.

The Rural Principal

There is no more difficult leadership role in a school organization than that of the principal. Whether rural, urban, elementary, middle, or high school, the on-site education leader needs to be all things to all people in the school environment—hard work on any given day! While rural principals share many commonalities with their urban counterparts, they also face unique challenges related to their context. Many of my conversations with rural principals center around a universal theme: they wear many hats that they may not have been prepared to don (including, in some cases, that of superintendent). These varied responsibilities generally fall into two primary categories: instructional leader and manager. In rural school settings, where schools are often smaller and have fewer resources than their urban counterparts, balancing and mastering the responsibilities of these dual roles becomes even more critical.

Because I came to superintendency from a principalship, I found the instructional leader part of my job easy in comparison with my other duties. In a nutshell, instructional leadership is the actions school leaders take to improve teaching and learning. These actions may look different in rural settings for several reasons. First, rural schools tend to have fewer resources to draw on for day-to-day curriculum implementation and assessment, requiring more leader involvement. Teachers may also need school leaders to procure different types of instructional support. Having fewer teachers in the district can hinder collaboration and networking between grade levels and content areas. Rural instructional leaders may need to actively seek out opportunities to share ideas and resources with others. This could involve building relationships with other schools, partnering with community organizations, or leveraging online platforms to connect educators from diverse regions.

Equally pressing are the critical operations of keeping the school's lights on and ensuring staff are paid on time. Savvy managers set themselves up for success by being proactive whenever possible in balancing the time commitments of management with those of instructional leadership. To paraphrase one of my professors, it's vital that you don't let the urgent get in the way of the important. Implementing processes and protocols around tasks like verifying

payroll hours, signing off on purchase requisitions, and submitting required grant reports is key to being able to perform these tasks at high levels. Also vital is ensuring that any new tasks are fully understood, which underlines the importance of training and support for new leaders. This is where my own gaps in knowledge were the most glaring—and where I spent most of the first two years of my superintendency bulking up my practice. We will take a deep dive into some strategies to assist with this balancing act in Chapters 3 and 4.

Having been both an assistant principal and a site-level principal in my rural district of Sierra Vista, Arizona, I had some advantages that many of my peers did not. The district was large enough to provide administrative support for professional development, budgeting and procurement, and human resources (HR), as well as a level of insulation between the school site and the governing board. Good, bad, or indifferent, assistance in these areas gave me the luxury of being able to focus on the students and staff of my school rather than having to address all the challenges of the day-to-day running of the district as a whole. Many rural schools that I have come to know in the last decade feature a leadership organizational chart that is very flat and thin. In my current district, I am not only the superintendent but also the business manager, federal and state grants director, and HR director. Our principal (luckily, I have one to work with) takes on some district-level responsibilities as well, including serving as special education director and planning and implementing professional development for certified and classified staff. She is visible on buses, in the cafeteria, and at sporting events. She and I meet on an almost daily basis to plan, review data, and evaluate goal progress. Occasionally we even commiserate with one another! The level of working knowledge required for us to be effective in our myriad roles is vast. We each approach our role as generalists; we have to know how the system works to efficiently and effectively run the school and support district efforts. We'll explore the different aspects of rural principalship time management further in Chapter 4.

The Rural Advocate

As a rural school leader, I am the voice for the students in my community. I believe I have a duty to ensure that policymakers and influencers at all levels of the legislative process understand the importance of rural voices. Rural advocates face unique political issues that their urban counterparts may address differently or not at all. One such concern was the capacity of my district to

continue to provide high-quality classroom instruction despite declining enrollment, loss of funding due to the approaching end to a voter-approved budget override (which implements a secondary property tax to fund education), and a central office staff of four. In my first three years as superintendent, I had to trim almost \$1 million from the maintenance and operations budget (previously \$5.5 million annually), cut staff and nonessential programming, and freeze pay increases to combat the severe financial reduction. Although the governing board has again called for overrides several times in the last decade, they have not been approved by voters. When these issues directly affect our staff and students, it is one of my responsibilities to tell the story of my district and share how the state's funding structure creates inequities for rural students. And to be clear, funding is not the only area of concern.

The unique needs of rural education are often overlooked, perhaps because “only” one in five American students attends school in a rural area (NCES, 2017). It is essential to elevate rural voices to include them in policy discussions at all levels. Unfortunately, little attention is spent on rural public education issues, to the point where most research and subsequent decisions are considerably urban-centric. Being heard regarding state initiatives, funding discussions, and other areas of district concern is a priority for me. I know that if there is no rural representation at policy meetings, urban perspectives will most likely be the only viewpoints considered—often with detrimental consequences for rural schools. It is imperative rural leaders work collectively on funding and education issues; they must take part in the process of considering education-related bills at all levels of government.

Relationships Matter

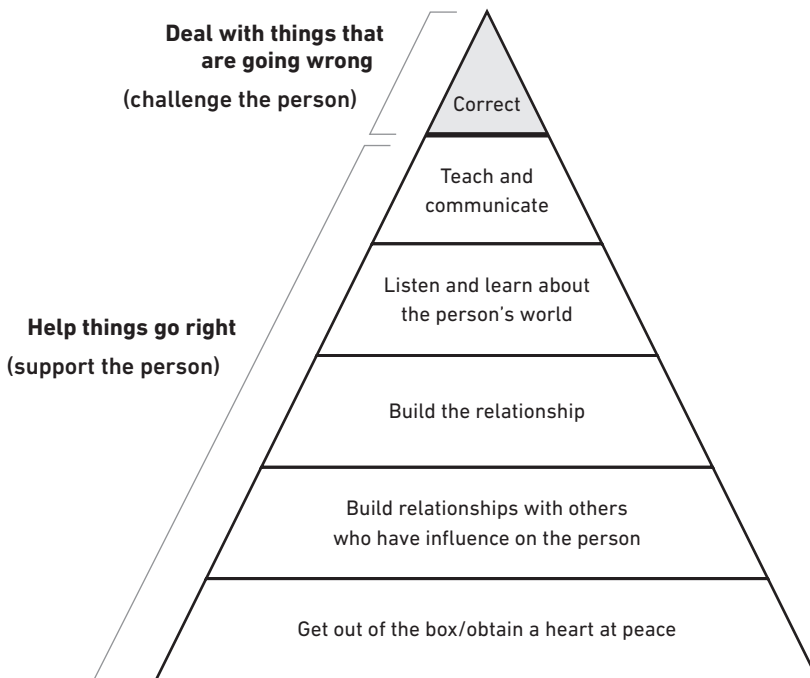
One thing I learned early on was the importance of nurturing relationships to support successful advocacy efforts. As I explored how best to become an effective advocate for my district, I tapped into the expertise of a superintendent colleague who excels in advocacy work. His framing: all politics are local. (Coincidentally, my state rural association approaches policy work in the same way). There are multiple areas of concern within education policy, from state statutes to state board of education policies to executive actions to federal regulations. Our influence is strongest with the *people* who make the decisions. Whether they are legislators, bureaucrats, or policy advisors, we can start to change education policy through our interactions with those decision makers. When we reach out to our policymakers with our help and support

and share our rural perspective, we can establish a positive line of communication that secures our place at the table when decisions are made.

The Pyramid of Change (Figure 1.2) is a framework that depicts the broadening effects created by different approaches to change. Most of your advocacy efforts will fall in the category of helping policymakers get it right—and a lot will involve relationship building. As education advocates, we have to start by being OK with knowing that differences of opinion and approach are part of life. We must also make an effort to get to know those at the policymaking table, both the ones we want to focus on and those who are their known and trusted allies. Beginning with relationship building is critical for advocacy work. We want to know *what* officials think, and we want to understand *why* they think the way they do. If I know that a particular lawmaker has a child with special needs and previously had a negative experience navigating services in their home district, I can have a better appreciation for the bill they proposed on fiscal consequences for schools that are not responsive to meeting IEP goals in a timely manner. With that understanding in place, I can

FIGURE 1.2

Pyramid of Change



better communicate why such legislation might negatively affect the special education program in my rural community.

Educating policymakers on latent consequences to rural schools is where the true power of advocacy work resides. But when legislation that I would consider to be harmful has already moved forward, I implement the “Correct” step from the top of the pyramid, perhaps by penning an op-ed piece detailing the concerns I have, speaking out against the legislation at a committee hearing, or contacting other legislators who may be able to stop the bill. Keep in mind that correction is a last resort, and must be done in a way that preserves your relationship with the people you wish to influence.

Being an Effective Rural Advocate

Your lived experience as a rural leader is the best tool in your advocacy toolkit. You can share knowledge that elected officials and others need to consider when they are deliberating on a vote. Why will certain policies work in an urban area but not in a rural context? You know the answer and can provide details with both facts and anecdotes. You are the expert who can connect the dots between policy and place in a way no other leader can. So after building relationships with policymakers, what are the next steps in your advocacy efforts? Here are some things to ponder:

- Know why you are advocating for a particular issue and what the consequences of a particular bill would be for your school community.
- Know the policymaker—learn about their background, their assigned committees, and their areas of expertise and interest.
- Find common ground with policymakers in your shared belief in the importance of education—even if opinions differ as to the best way to provide it.
- You can’t advocate for something that you don’t understand. Do the homework needed to speak intelligently on any advocacy issue, including the opposing point of view.
- Know the policymaker’s position on an issue. If it’s not clear, ask and be open to listening to the answer. Good advocacy work can and should include making an effort to understand where you might be able to provide a different point of view.
- Keep your advocacy work laser focused on issues with a high impact on your students and community. Your time and effort are precious; don’t

squander your political capital by speaking to every issue on the table. Limit each encounter with the policymaker to two or three issues and illustrate your story with concise data.

- Keep your talking points and your requests short and simple while providing clarity on how the issues impact you so as not to waste time for either the policymaker or yourself.
- An advocacy visit is not a time for a debate! Remain calm and nonjudgmental. You are expected to take a stand on the issues at hand, but you should also be open to others' points of view.
- Advocacy is a year-round endeavor. Your first advocacy meeting should not be the only time a policymaker sees you. Work throughout the year to get to know each other.
- Don't rule out meeting with officials who are not aligned with your position. The whole point of advocacy work is to highlight what works for rural schools and communities—they need your voice, especially in this context!
- Offer your expertise to assist with writing or refining bills or policies. Most lawmakers do not draft their own legislation. You can bring an idea or proposal to be considered, review proposed legislation and provide insights on positive and negative outcomes for rural schools, or speak in support of or against legislation in a committee hearing.
- Most policymakers are not educators, so they rely heavily on staffers when considering education policy. Set yourself up as a resource for these staffers, invite them out to see your school, and send them resources and information. Meet with them if the policymaker is not available. Over time, being an ally and an expert voice in the field—one with a specific rural point of view—will boost your influence on their work.
- Even if your meeting doesn't go as planned or you don't get what you ask for, be sure to thank the policymaker for their time. Keep the door open for future conversations!

Assessing the Impact of Policies and Regulations on Rural Education

Are advocacy efforts worth carving out time in your very stretched calendar? I believe they are one of the more important functions of a rural leader! A very

informal straw poll that I did with rural superintendents in my state revealed that the majority feel that both federal and state policies often overlook rural schools and their students. This may be because most policymakers and influencers do not live in rural places and therefore have limited understanding of the unique needs of rural people.

A few years ago, I invited the executive board and management of an educational nonprofit located in Phoenix, Arizona, to hold their quarterly board meeting on my campus. We planned a tour led by students, classroom visits, and a meet-and-greet with the administration. Less than a handful of the 20 attendees had any kind of rural background or understanding. The rest had never even been to a rural school! Stanfield is an hour away from downtown Phoenix, so we aren't as remote as many rural schools. And yet if these individuals involved in advocacy work for *all* Arizona schools lacked acquaintance with the rural context, how effective were their efforts for students who attend rural schools? "I just didn't know there were schools like this" was heard over and over as we gave the tour and answered questions. The bottom line is people who are making or influencing rural education policy need to spend time in rural schools to gain a fuller understanding of the issues.

There are also concerns related to federal grant funding. For example, Title I funding to address educational quality for low-income students is allocated using a formula that favors larger districts. Even though more than 85 percent of students in my district receive free or reduced-price lunch, because our total population is small, we receive less funding than a neighboring district with a 50 percent free and reduced-price lunch count and twice as many students. Title I is a noncompetitive grant, and we receive the allocated amount provided we are in good status with all grant requirements. However, an increasing number of federal competitive grants are offered for a variety of program focuses each fiscal year. As a U.S. Department of Education School Ambassador Fellow, I have been a reviewer for several such grants, and I can say without a doubt that I would not have the time or capacity to apply for most of them. Gathering the required documentation, program narratives, and other application requirements is a hardship for most rural schools, given that staff are often already at their limits. Therefore, larger urban and suburban districts with greater staffing capacity are typically the recipients of these funds.

Stronger Together

The rural setting can be isolating—even in a school district! In Arizona, 55 districts are considered single-site local education agencies (LEAs). These districts, including mine, are typically small, cover elementary grade ranges, and can often be remote. In such districts, educator affinity groups found in larger urban districts are hard to maintain or nonexistent. What this has highlighted for me, especially during the pandemic, was the need to intentionally connect with colleagues to exchange ideas, challenges, and resources. Especially if you are new to your position as a rural leader, I strongly encourage you to join one or more existing rural education support networks, many available at no or low cost.

Ad Hoc Support Systems

In March 2020, the U.S. education community as a whole was thrown into unprecedented (I grew tired of that word!) circumstances when the COVID-19 pandemic required schools to conduct the business of teaching and learning in a way that had never been done before. My principal and I labored over how to provide digital learning to our students, most of whom did not have broadband internet access; how to keep teachers engaged and active even from home; and how to continue to support students' basic needs, such as food and counseling services. I was able to meet weekly with other superintendents in my county using virtual platforms over the next few months. It was helpful to hear what plans others were considering, what safety protocols were being instituted, and what the myriad reports needed for our state department of education entailed. Most of this planning and reporting fell to me as the superintendent, as my principal had her hands full figuring out how to sustain teaching in a community with limited broadband access. Without the support of my colleagues, our plans would not have been as successful.

I assumed that if I was struggling with how to ensure everyone had what they needed to keep going, while at the same time take care of myself, other rural leaders were struggling as well. With the assistance of Grand Canyon University's Canyon Professional Development division, two of my colleagues and I started a Rural Education Leaders Network that offered two things: (1) professional development around just-in-time strategic planning, and (2) the opportunity to talk to peers about what was going on in their communities and how they were approaching barriers and challenges. The first year saw

participation from 25 leaders around Arizona. It went so well, and the feedback was so positive, that we launched a second year in collaboration with the Small School Districts' Association of California and expanded our reach to the Southwestern states of California, Utah, and Nevada. The second year drew in 65 leaders to network and participate in virtual sessions focused on John Maxwell's *The Five Levels of Leadership* (2011). Now in its third year of operation, the Rural Education Leaders Network (RELN) is offered in 16 Western states and has almost doubled its membership. The bottom line is that rural leaders need each other! The synergy that happens when professionals talk about their day-to-day challenges and successes is a powerful thing that can be rare in a rural setting. The RELN is only one of many such opportunities. Look for communities of practice in your state or region through your state associations, higher education institutions, or your Regional Education Laboratory. And if you can't find one, start one in your area! A silver lining of the pandemic was the way rural places connected virtually with each other in the absence of face-to-face opportunities. Start small and go virtual!

National education associations are another means of connecting with peers. For example, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) offers an online community of practice specifically for rural principals that meets regularly to provide support and information to members and nonmembers. You can find out more about the NASSP's Rural School Leaders Network at www.nassp.org/leadership-networks/rural-school-leaders-network.

Rural Associations and Organizations

Organizations at the local, state, and national levels can offer ways to get involved with rural education policy work, network, and gather information to support your advocacy.

- **Local Level**

- Most counties have an Education Service Agency (ESA) or Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of some kind. They may be able to support a partnership with other rural schools in your area by offering a meeting location, bringing in resources and technical assistance, or providing opportunities for networking and training. If this kind of arrangement isn't in place in your area, reach out to start one! Even quick check-ins allow rural leaders time to talk with one another.

- Local service organizations like Rotary Club or Elks Club can be a way to connect with the community. Hearing from club members outside the education community can supply valuable context for some of the issues and barriers that affect rural schools. Local chambers of commerce can serve in the same capacity.

- **State Level**

- Forty-two states have a rural education association of some kind (National Rural Education Association, n.d.). State associations often provide a variety of information, training, and technical assistance. Most have some kind of annual conference that brings the field together for networking and professional development.
- Rural resource centers are also typically run at the state level and associated with an institution of higher learning. There is no standard type of center—all offer resources and support unique to the rural leaders and schools in their state. Currently, 20 rural resource centers operate throughout the United States. Contact the universities in your state to see if they sponsor organizations that specifically focus on rural education.

- **Regional Level**

- The U.S. Department of Education's Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Program comprises 10 regions across the country that partner with educators and policymakers to support meaningful change. They work with LEAs and state education agencies (SEAs) on decisions about education policy, programs, and practices in pursuit of positive educational outcomes. Currently, the REL program is authorized under the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 and administered by the Institute of Education Sciences. Twenty percent of all funding must be targeted to assist rural education in each region. For more information, visit <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel>.
- The Rural Schools Collaborative is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Illinois with a focus on building sustainable rural communities by working to connect place, teachers, and philanthropy. Twelve Regional Hubs operate in 30 states to facilitate collaboration on projects and grants and highlight the efforts of rural teachers. For more information, visit <https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/regional-hubs>.

- **National Level**

- The National Rural Education Association serves as a rural advocate at the national level with both the U.S. Department of Education and Congress. They also interact with the White House on a variety of issues concerning rural students and schools. Additionally, they provide professional development opportunities to members at an annual national conference and support research on rural schools, which is disseminated in a quarterly publication. For more information, visit www.nrea.net.
- The National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition represents several organizations including the National Rural Education Association, the American Association of School Administrators, and a number of state rural education associations. Each year they release a legislative agenda focused on rural issues and work with the Department of Education and legislators to advance the rural education perspective. For more information, visit www.nrea.net/nreac-legislation.
- The American Council on Rural Special Education advocates for enhanced services for children with exceptional needs in rural places. For more information, visit www.acres-sped.org.

- **Other Federal Resources**

- The Rural Education Resource Center of the U.S. Department of Education offers a variety of programs, upcoming events, news, and grant information. I use the center's website to gather information to support my advocacy work at both the state and federal levels, and I recommend checking it regularly for updates. For more information, visit www.ed.gov/rural-education.
- The National Agricultural Library of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has resources on a host of relevant topics, including community development, rural health services, housing, and environmental justice. As the hub of a typical rural community, the USDA may be able to provide support and information on efforts that involve not just the school but the community at large, with the rural leader serving as a facilitator to move policy and action forward. For more information, visit www.nal.usda.gov/legacy/ric/rural-citizen-services.
- The Department of Education's 10 RELs, referenced above, are another resource for the rural advocate. One of the key missions of the REL

Program is to assist rural schools by providing training and technical support, conducting rural education research, and reporting research findings to the field. Twenty percent of the REL budget must be spent on rural initiatives and programming. As a member of the REL 15 Rural Community of Practice, I meet regularly with LEAs and SEAs to investigate current rural issues facing schools and determine how SEAs can offer support. This community of practice has been not only a source of high-quality research and technical information, but also an avenue for networking across the four states covered. (The RELN, mentioned earlier, was formed from these relationships.) For more information, visit <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/rural.asp>.

The many diverse responsibilities that fall onto the shoulders of the rural leader can often include tasks the leader is not fully prepared to address. From working with a governing board, to managing the fiscal duties of the district, to being a vocal advocate for the school and community, to ensuring an effective community of support is in place, leadership in a rural district is multifaceted. Just like with teaching, you'll never experience the same day twice!

Although rural school leadership may involve wearing many hats, it is a rewarding endeavor that is closely tied to the success of the community being served. Ensuring that multiple supports are in place, starting with the governing board, and roles are clearly defined can have a positive impact on your success as a rural leader learning the ropes while also balancing the duties of instructional leader and manager.

Rural school leaders across different communities often must overcome similar barriers to overcome. One of my mantras is "Rural innovates out of necessity!" If the answer to a problem is not readily apparent, rural leaders must find a creative solution. The following chapters highlight various rural school leadership challenges and some trailblazing solutions unique to rural settings to address them. Context matters; while some solutions seem tailor-made for one rural school, they may not be practical or even possible in another. Some chapters may apply directly to your current circumstances; others might not be as relevant but may spark some proactive planning. Either way, the resources and ideas shared are ones that have made a difference for rural leaders on the ground—and I hope they will serve you well, too.

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