

## The Rural Superintendency: Reconsidering the Administrative Farm System

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This paper examines the role and preparation of rural superintendents by reconsidering the informal administrative farm system that presently exists. The first part of the paper reports the findings of a comparative case study that examined effective schools in rural settings. The second part of the paper reports rural-suburban salary, recruitment and retention disparities. The paper concludes with recommendations for a proposed administrative preparation program designed to improve the quality of educational leadership in small rural districts.

There is a prevailing wisdom in major league baseball that the soundest route to long term success is through a team's careful cultivation of its minor league system. Young prospects have the opportunity to gain experience and work on the mechanics of their game while "down on the farm." The minor leagues therefore serve as a training ground for young athletes who "pay their dues" until that glorious day when they get the chance to enter the more visible and high pay world of the major leagues. Obviously, some never make it to the big leagues, and as good as they might be, they are forever viewed by some (often including themselves), as having been unsuccessful. For most ballplayers, the farm system serves as a means to an end, and success is measured by whether or not one makes it to the big leagues.

Unfortunately, educational administration has developed an analogous, though informal, career path for school district superintendents, with the rural superintendency serving as the farm system for 'big league' districts in urban and suburban areas. As Monk and Haller [8] noted, "Excellent administrative leadership may be in short supply in New York State's rural schools," due to the fact that, ". . . good administrators moved on to better jobs in larger districts—'better' in the sense of greater responsibilities and higher salaries (p. 44)."

Indeed, I recall being told at the end of my own administrative preparation program that the time had come for me to seek an entry-level supervisory position in a small district somewhere "out in the boondocks." I was further advised that by carefully planning my career, I could move through a series of successively larger and higher paying districts until finally, if I were successful, I would land a position in a "major" district, which in downstate New York meant somewhere in either Westchester or Nassau counties.

Implicit in this carefully planned movement through positions and districts is the underlying assumption that bigger is better, and that the inability to land to a position in a "big league" district is an indication of a less-than-successful career. Those administrators who choose not to buy into this career route invite being stigmatized as lacking in ambition or talent or both, an analogous situation to a ballplayer who never makes it out of the minor leagues. After all, why would anyone want to remain in the administrative farm system of small rural districts?

When asked to reflect on the heavy turn-over of superintendents in districts that comprise a predominantly rural region of Central New York, one state official observed that decent superintendents moved on to larger districts as soon as they had the opportunity in order to both improve their salary and to avoid the risk of being buried professionally [6].

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to consider the effects of administrative career routing, and the informal farm system it creates, by examining the role and preparation of the rural superintendent. The first part of the paper reports briefly the findings of a comparative case study that attempted to extend effective schools research into rural settings, while the second part of the paper considers a proposed administrative preparation program designed for individuals who view rural schools as part of the big leagues, and not simply a means to an end. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy and future research.

### *Effective Rural Schools*

In 1985, the research committee of the National Rural Education Association queried superintendents from

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districts serving less than 1,000 K-12 students as to the primary research needs of rural education. Of the top five needs reported by 180 respondents, three were specifically concerned with rural school effectiveness:

- (1) Strategies which capitalize on the strengths of small schools and seek to correct the deficiencies;
- (2) Successful practices/programs in rural schools at both the elementary and secondary level that can be replicated;
- (3) Characteristics of effective rural schools.

Although these three needs were presented as distinct entities, research on school effectiveness suggests that administrative leadership may be the unifying thread and perhaps the single most important factor in creating effective schools. As Coleman [3] noted,

This component (administrative leadership) has emerged from virtually all the effective school studies as critical, even when the initial expectations did not include it as a factor. Any consideration of school district processes necessarily must include leadership as a primary linking mechanism (p. 93).

Indeed, there appears to be a consensus that it is the school building principal who plays the pivotal role in whether or not a school is "effective." In a summary of effective schools research, Rosenholtz [11], noted that effective principals, "arm their schools with common objectives toward which to collectively aim (p. 381)." First, effective principals establish improved student learning as the unitary mission of their schools, after which they convey to their faculties the certainty that student achievement can be raised through collective effort. In order to reach their goals, effective principals recruit teachers selectively, involve teachers in all aspects of planning, and then protect their teachers from disruptive, non-teaching events such as having to discipline students.

It is important to note that the effective schools research has focused primarily on inner-city elementary schools. This raises the question of whether effective schools findings are generalizable to small rural districts. In order to examine the problem, the behaviors of superintendents in two neighboring small rural districts were compared<sup>1</sup>. The districts were selected because they were alike in all important respects except that one had a reputation for being effective, while the other did not.

The findings of the study suggested that many of the same behaviors that characterized principals in effective inner-city schools were evident in the superintendent of the effective small rural district. For example, the "effective" superintendent had one very clear objective and that was to improve student performance. He made his faculty aware that he believed that their performance was *the* critical factor in student improvement. Student and teacher performance was monitored and teachers not meeting expectations were denied tenure, pressured into retirement, or dismissed. At the same time, teachers who met the superintendent's expectations were

encouraged to collaboratively problem-solve, with the assurance that their efforts would be supported through the implementation and enforcement of a strict code of student discipline.

Subsequent gains in student achievement provided teachers with intrinsic payoffs, while reductions in disciplinary problems improved their working conditions. Together these factors reinforced teacher commitment to both the district and to the superintendent's goal of improved student achievement. This focused commitment to achievement was ultimately internalized by the district's school board and the community at large. Over the course of his incumbency, this effective rural superintendent has mobilized not only his staff, but the community as well. Indeed, this factor may have been the critical ingredient in the district's success, for while the role of a superintendent in a small rural district incorporates many of the same responsibilities as an effective building principal in an urban district, the rural superintendent is in the unique position of being able to provide direction and leadership for the district's entire educational program.

The superintendent and all the members of the effective district's school board go away every year for a retreat in order to develop the district's annual goals and to establish the strategies necessary to attain them. This superintendent viewed his job as requiring him to educate his community and school board about the educational services they should want. He actively worked to raise community expectations as to what students could achieve and then worked to insure that his faculty and students met those expectations. As the board president noted, "We feel that we have a good strong administrator who knows where he wants to go and knows what he wants us to do [5, p. 56]."

In contrast, the superintendent in the comparison district viewed his role as that of a steward who was responsible for providing only the type of educational services the community wanted. Since the community did not want much from its schools, that is exactly what it got. He consistently maintained a non-interventionist relationship with his board. As one board member observed, "He never tries to interfere with the board, never! He will submit what he thinks is needed and then it is strictly up to the board, he does not try to argue them for or against [5, p. 53]."

The findings of this study suggest that the quality of administrative leadership may be one of the most important determinants in the quality of educational programs in small rural school districts. As Monk and Haller (1986) concluded, "We suspect that whether a school district offers good programs or poor ones has less to do with its size than with the quality of its superintendent and board (p. 46)."

Indeed, the whole issue of unit size, specifically the notion that bigger is necessarily better, is presently being reconsidered. For example, Peters and Waterman [10] searched for excellence in the corporate sector and found among other things that "chucking," *i.e.*, breaking large units into smaller, more manageable units, distinguished unusually effective corporations from their less successful

competitors. Looking specifically at America's educational system, Boyer [2] observed that smaller schools provide greater opportunity for student participation and greater emotional support than larger ones. Coleman [3] concluded his study of student achievement and per pupil expenditure as measures of school effectiveness by noting that while his analysis do not allow assertions such as "smaller is better," the relationship between district size and program quality suggested that, "the unusually successful districts are rather small."

Summarizing this emerging position, Lamitie [7] wrote,

The benefits and advantages of small schools are becoming more apparent, and given adequate support for its development, an emerging "technology of individualization" may soon make it possible for school quality to be independent of school size (see abstract).

The 'bottom line' is that size of schools and school districts seems consistently unrelated to student learning outcomes [12, p. 9].

#### *Recruiting and Retaining Effective Superintendents*

DeYoung [4] in his review of rural education research characterized the major battle in the rural school literature as forming around the issue of community control versus appropriate school size. Assuming that Lamitie is correct in his assertion that student learning outcomes will soon be independent of size, then small rural districts need no longer, by definition, be considered deficient. And if, as Monk and Haller conclude, educational quality in small rural districts is determined primarily by the quality of administrative leadership, then the major rural education policy battle should shift from creating larger districts through mergers and consolidations to helping small rural districts attract and retain more effective administrators and faculty.

Considering that rural schools have done remarkably well with their existing workforce, Swanson and Jacobson [13] wondered what rural schools could accomplish if they were able to attract and retain teachers and administrators of the caliber found in the more affluent suburbs. Unfortunately teacher and administrator salaries are notoriously low in rural school districts, particularly when compared with salaries offered in most affluent suburbs (see Table 1).

Table 1 reports the regional mean salaries paid by districts in two regions of New York in 1974 and 1984 to teachers at three levels of experience, entry-level, mid-career and senior<sup>2</sup>. The suburban region comprised the 56 districts of Nassau County, while the rural region comprised 18 districts in Central New York. Not surprisingly, Table 1 reveals that teachers in suburban districts earned more than their rural counterparts at all three levels of experience at both points in time. What is perhaps surprising is the fact that these salary differentials have grown wider over time. The average beginning

**TABLE 1**  
Comparison of Teacher Salaries in Suburban<sup>1</sup>  
and Rural<sup>2</sup> Districts

Entry-Level (\$) <sup>3</sup>	1974	1984	% Increase
Suburban	10928	19176	75
Rural	7986	12799	60
Difference	2942	6377	117
<b>Mid-career (\$) <sup>4</sup></b>			
Suburban	16995	29755	75
Rural	11711	18318	56
Difference	5284	11437	116
<b>Senior (\$) <sup>5</sup></b>			
Suburban	20767	36829	77
Rural	13750	24259	76
Difference	7017	12570	79

<sup>1</sup>Based on 56 suburban districts in Nassau County.

<sup>2</sup>Based on 18 rural districts in Delaware, Chenango, Madison and Otsego Counties.

<sup>3</sup>Based on mean salaries paid newly hired teachers.

<sup>4</sup>Based on mean salaries paid teachers with 9-11 years of district experience.

<sup>5</sup>Based on mean salaries paid teachers with >17 years of district experience.

Note: Calculated from New York State Education Department, Personnel Master Files 1974 & 1984.

teacher in the suburban districts in 1974 earned just under \$3,000 more than a beginning teacher in a rural district. By 1984 this difference had increased to over \$6,000. Average suburban-rural teacher salary differences in 1984 were \$11,437 at mid-career, and \$12,570 for senior teachers. In fact, the average entry-level salary for suburban teachers in 1984 was almost 5% higher than the average salary paid a mid-career rural teacher, and only 20% less than the average salary paid a rural teacher with at least 17 years of district experience.

Low teacher and administrator salaries arise in part from the economic constraints faced by many rural communities and from the low prevailing wage scales that exist for all occupations in rural areas. Indeed, Monk and Haller reported that administrators' salaries were quite low in the districts they studied. These marked salary differentials may help account for the fact that teachers and administrators seeking employment in rural districts are likely to be less experienced and have less professional training than educators seeking employment in suburban districts (see Table 2).

At a time when serious questions are being raised about the quality of the nation's teacher workforce, marked differences exist in the credentials of teaching candidates available to rural and suburban districts. Table 2 reveals that the pool of teachers available in the suburban region was, on average, better educated and more experienced than in the rural region in both 1974 and 1984. In fact, the average educational training of

**TABLE 2**  
Comparison of Mean Educational Training  
and Experience in Suburban  
and Rural Recruitment Pools  
(1974 and 1984)

	All teachers available			
	1974		1984	
	Degree <sup>1</sup>	Exp <sup>2</sup>	Degree	Exp
Suburban <sup>3</sup>	5.76	3.02	6.38	5.29
Rural <sup>4</sup>	5.25	2.37	5.67	4.33
Novice teachers only				
	Degree		Degree	
Suburban	5.36		5.72	
Rural	5.13		5.12	

<sup>1</sup>Degree: BA = 5, BA + 30 = 6, MA = 7, MA + 30 = 8.

<sup>2</sup>Experience reported in number of years of prior teaching experience.

<sup>3</sup>Based on 56 districts in Nassau County.

<sup>4</sup>Based on 18 districts in Delaware, Chenango, Madison and Otsego Counties.

Note: Calculated from New York SED, Personnel Master Files 1974 & 1984.

teacher candidates in this rural region in 1984 was lower than that of teaching candidates in the suburban region ten years earlier. Furthermore, the average educational training of novice teachers, *i.e.*, teachers with no prior experience, remained virtually unchanged in the rural pool for the ten year period. Novice teachers in the rural region averaged a BA + 3 graduate credits in both 1974 and 1984, while the average educational training of novice teachers in the suburban region increased from a BA + 11 graduate credits in 1974 to a BA + 22 graduate credits 1984. In other words, in 1984 the average novice teacher in the suburban region had taken roughly 7 graduate level courses before accepting his or her first teaching position, as compared to only one graduate level course for the rural novice teacher.

One might argue that on-the-job experience is no less important than advanced graduate training in the development of good teachers and administrators. Unfortunately, teacher turnover is also higher in small rural districts than in suburban districts (see Table 3).

Table 3 reports teacher retention rates in rural and suburban districts, specifically the mean percentage of 1974 teachers who were still working in the same district in 1984. Note that these 10-year retention rates are consistently 4% lower in the rural districts than in the suburban districts, whether the data is examined in aggregate or by gender.

If small rural districts have more difficulty holding on to capable teachers than suburban districts, it seems reasonable to assume that they have even more difficulty retaining good administrators, particularly when one considers that intra-district administrative movement, which might allow an individual greater responsibility

**TABLE 3**  
Comparison of Teacher Retention Rates  
in Suburban and Rural Districts

	Total <sup>1</sup>	Male	Female
Suburban <sup>2</sup>	51	57	47
Rural <sup>3</sup>	47	53	43

<sup>1</sup>Percentage of 1974 teachers under age 60 still in the same district in 1984.

<sup>2</sup>Based on 56 districts in Nassau County.

<sup>3</sup>Based on 18 districts in Delaware, Chenango, Madison and Otsego Counties.

Note: Calculated from New York SED, Personnel Master Files 1974 & 1984.

and higher salary without having to migrate, is not possible in small districts where there may be only one or two administrative positions in toto.

The evidence presented thus far indicates that rural education has reached an important juncture. A growing body of literature suggests that the quality of administrative leadership outweighs district size as the critical determinant of educational quality. Yet market pressures and informal traditions, in the form of low salaries and administrative career paths, cause the most effective administrators to leave the farm system of rural districts for the greener (as in dollars) pastures of larger districts. The challenge, therefore, is not to simply turn small districts into larger districts, but rather to reorder administrative priorities so that rural districts are viewed as big league. The logical place to begin such a transition would be in administrative preparation programs.

### *Preparing Rural Superintendents<sup>3</sup>*

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the rural superintendency is the multiplicity of roles the incumbent must assume. For example, in addition to being the district's superintendent, the effective superintendent described earlier was also the district's high school principal, school business manager, personnel director, purchasing agent, athletic director, football and wrestling coach, and on rare occasions, substitute bus driver. This superintendent shared with me his amusement over rural efficiency, noting that only a rural district could get away with buying so many administrative services for one paycheck. He told me that he had often considered the possibility of moving on to a larger district where he could earn more for doing less.

But administrative diversity is not the only challenge of the rural superintendency. Small rural districts are often characterized as being more insulated and provincial than urban and suburban districts. As one unhappy resident from the "less-than-effective" superintendent's district noted,

I think that every one of the board members came through the school system and as far as

their concerned, it's good enough for them.  
It's that old-time religion bit [5, p. 57].

One result of this provincialism is a "go-slow" approach that often keeps educational and occupational aspirations low. The rural superintendent has to be a public relations specialist in diplomatically developing new programs that can help the district expand its horizons. The rural superintendent also has to be attentive to new innovations and educational technologies that can help the district overcome problems that result from low population densities, e.g., telecommunications and distance learning. In order to implement any of these changes, the rural superintendent must also be a capable salesperson because rural districts often lack the necessary tax base to support the types of educational innovations commonly found in urban and suburban settings.

Small, rural districts can simply not afford the level of administrative specialization that characterizes larger districts. As a result, the rural superintendency requires a preparation program that must be characterized by breadth as well as depth, for in many ways, the rural superintendent is education's jack of all trades. Indeed, this is one of the factors that has made rural districts particularly attractive to novice administrators. Since they have the opportunity to try-out various administrative functions in the process of acquiring on-the-job experience, rural administrators can enhance their marketability by tailoring subsequent resumes to meet the job descriptions of a variety of higher paying central office positions available in larger districts. Unfortunately, the benefits of these experiences accrue to the individual and the larger district, while the rural "farm team" is once again left with a gaping hole to fill, a hole that quite probably will be filled by another "newly-minted," inexperienced administrator.

How then do we work out of this vicious cycle? I think we need to begin by developing a course of study that addresses the specific needs of the rural administrator as opposed to the more generic type of administrative preparation presently available. At the heart of this program would be an intensive full-time, paid internship in a small rural district. The costs of this internship would be partially underwritten by the state and partially underwritten by a consortium of small rural districts that would be active participants in the preparation program. This consortium would nominate candidates for participation in this administrative preparation program, as opposed to the kind of self-selection that presently characterizes educational administration programs. This nomination process would increase the likelihood that individuals participating in the program would be of high quality and committed to rural education. In addition, a nomination process should produce greater market sensitivity in terms of the number of administrator certifications awarded. Presently, some institutions are simply "grinding out" certified administrators with little regard for market demand. New York State, for example, has four available certificate holders for every administrative position [1].

A discussion of the specific content of a rural administrator preparation program is beyond the scope of this paper, but clearly it should be tied to the growing body of work on rural school effectiveness. Administrative trainees should be actively involved in this emerging research and their own research should reflect field-based problems encountered in their internship. Graduates of the program should be guaranteed employment in one of the consortium districts, and all consortium administrators would have on-going access to the program in order to regularly upgrade their skills and to collaboratively problem-solve with colleagues. The development of a highly selective and rigorous program for the preparation of rural administrators would go a long way to assuage the perception that rural districts are anything less than major league.

In order to promote rural education through the improvement of administrative leadership, States should supplement both the costs of these preparation programs and the salaries of rural superintendents. State subsidies for improving teacher salaries have been a cornerstone of the reform movement. For example, New York State presently has a program entitled Excellence in Teaching (EIT) which was intended primarily to raise entry-level teacher salaries, particularly in those districts where salaries were below the regional or statewide mean. EIT appropriations totaled almost \$95 million in 1986/87 and \$130 million in 1987/88. A similar program for administrators could go along way in reducing salary disparities and thus alleviate some of the market pressure that underlies the present administrative farm system.

The recommendations offered in this paper reflect some of the reforms proposed in *Leaders for America's Schools*, the recent report of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration [9]. If we are to begin seriously reconsidering the way we prepare our educational leaders, then this is the appropriate time to seriously reconsider the career paths available to them, particularly since the administrative farm system does not serve our rural districts well.

<sup>1</sup>This study is reported in its entirety in Jacobson, S.L. (1986). *Administrative leadership and effective small rural schools: A comparative case study*. Ithaca, NY: New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. (ERIC ED 276 548), and summarized in Jacobson, S.L. (1988). Effective superintendents of small, rural districts. *Journal of Rural and Small Schools*, 2, 2, 17-21.

<sup>2</sup>An analysis of salaries paid administrators in rural, suburban and urban districts nationwide will soon be available based upon a survey conducted by the Executive Educator and the State University of New York at Buffalo. Nevertheless, the teacher salary and personnel data presented in this study are instructive for demonstrating differences that presently exist in rural and suburban school districts.

<sup>3</sup>Many of the comments presented in this section are drawn from a draft of a proposed preparation program

for rural administrators. I would like to thank the authors of that draft, who shall remain anonymous, for putting into words what for me had been vague ideas.

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