

Rural School Success: What Can We Learn?

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This article reports on an exploratory study of the factors perceived by school personnel to contribute to success in high-performing, high-needs (HPHN) rural schools. It is based on earlier research in HPHN schools that identified 4 key components of success (leadership, instruction, professional community, and school environment) and explored the factors that comprise them and the relationships among them. In this study, 21 central United States rural schools were identified whose assessment scores and free and/or reduced-price lunch rates indicated that they were high-performing but also high-needs. Principals from these schools were interviewed about the factors they associate with success. Five schools subsequently received site visits that included additional interviews and focus groups of educators, school board members, parents, and community representatives. From the site visits, case studies were created to further elaborate the schools' stories. The most important perceived factors identified from telephone interviews were high expectations, focus on student learning, use of data, individualization of instruction, teacher retention and professional development, and alignment of curriculum with assessment. The case studies revealed that although schools differed in context, they all reported a supportive relationship with their community, high teacher retention, and high expectations for students. The close relationship with the community was thought to help schools enact high expectations and facilitate principal leadership. Further work is needed to identify factors distinguishing high-performing, high-needs schools from low-performing, high-needs rural schools.

It has long been recognized that education is key for the health of rural America (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Stern, 1994). School consolidation, school closures, and a declining economic base for some rural communities have created hardships for rural families and schools. Rural schools also face serious issues in providing a full range of qualified teachers and the supportive resources to ensure success. Complicating this, research studies relevant to rural education and its particular context and challenges have always been sparse (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; DeYoung, 1987). Rural educators are also experiencing increased pressure to achieve 100% student proficiency in core subject areas by the year 2014 as a result of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), even though many of them perceive this expectation to be inadequately funded. Therefore, the press for all students to achieve suggests the value of knowledge of school-level factors associated with student success to supplement the portfolio of evidence-based instructional practices for high-needs student populations.

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The research team at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), responding to the challenge of high-needs schools that must achieve high performance, recently completed a large national study (McREL, 2005) to identify differences between high-performing, high-needs schools ("beat-the-odds" schools) and low-performing, high-needs schools. At a meeting of rural researchers and policymakers during the National Rural Education Association (NREA) conference in 2004, the authors were asked to follow up this study with one on high-performing, high-needs (HPHN) rural schools. This was the origin of the current study, a precursor to one that will compare high- and low-performing, high-needs rural schools.

Prior Research and Perspectives

Thirty years ago, fewer than 10% of schools in the United States could boast beat-the-odds status.¹ Now "The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act parallels what educators have long set their sights on: to equip every child with

¹The majority of their students achieving academically above what was predicted by their socioeconomic status and other background characteristics (Good & Brophy, 1986).

the knowledge and skills necessary for success in future schooling and in life” (Cicchinelli, Gaddy, Lefkowitz, & Miller, 2003, p. 7). The research available to educators about success factors in high-poverty schools is limited, even though schools are believed to be agents of social mediation in reducing gaps in social and economic status. Khattri, Riley, and Kane (1997) reviewed the research and found that students in poor rural areas did better academically than those in poor urban areas, but the research was limited in understanding how being rural and poor affects achievement.

The release of the Coleman Report in 1966 (Coleman et al., 1966) initiated a course of education research that has continued for almost 40 years to identify factors that would help reduce achievement gaps and make schools more effective change agents (Cotton, 1995; Creemers, 1994; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Reviews of this research indicate that school- and classroom-level factors account for significant proportions of the variance in student achievement (an estimated 7% and 13%, respectively) beyond the variance already accounted for by student background (Marzano, 2000; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). This effective schools research generally examines academic success broadly across different socioeconomic contexts. Although several researchers have examined effectiveness in high-poverty schools (e.g., Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Teddlie, Stringfield, Wimpelberg, & Kirby, 1989), the appropriateness of their findings to understanding effectiveness in the current context of standards-based education and accountability has yet to be examined.

Some research has been conducted on HPHN schools and districts, with a predominant case-study methodology. Based on this research, HPHN schools are characterized by comprehensive use of content standards to align curricula, teaching, professional development, and assessment (The Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Education Trust, 1999; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). More recent studies of HPHN schools (Education Trust, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005) supported a comprehensive approach to improving high-needs schools. Success factors identified from these studies included high expectations for all students, use of assessment data, rigorous academics, and well-prepared teachers. Yet little is known about how effectiveness factors influence each other and together, in turn, influence student learning and achievement. Therefore, for McREL’s HPHN study (McREL, 2005), the research team posed a primary question: What are the relationships among key school components that differentiate high-performing, high-needs schools from low-performing, high-needs schools? After additional review of the literature, four key components—leadership, instruction, professional community, and school environment—were identified, along with the 13 factors that comprise them. In planning the present study to identify success in high-needs rural schools we chose a more open-

ended approach, believing the context of rural education to be different in important aspects. We used the 13 factors from the HPHN study but solicited additional factors from rural principals, teachers, and community members. We also studied only high-performing, high-needs schools in the initial research as we clarified the critical variables.

Method

Research Design

This study was a descriptive, exploratory work intended to identify a set of variables related to factors thought to contribute to rural school success. The primary method was qualitative in order to allow educators and others to speak for themselves in identifying factors that they believe lead to success in high-performing, high-needs rural schools.

The research questions are:

1. To what do successful rural school educators and constituents attribute their success?
2. Of the set of school-level factors that influence student performance, which ones do successful rural schools consider important to their success?
3. What characteristics describe a successful rural school?

The study included two phases. First, principals in high-performing rural schools were interviewed by telephone about factors they believed contribute to their success. Second, a subsample of schools selected primarily because of the interview results received site visits to produce a set of case studies of successful rural schools.

Sample

For the first phase, a sample size of approximately 20 rural schools per level (elementary, middle, and high) was sought. The National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) definition of rural was used to identify schools from the Common Core of Data (CCD). This definition of rural includes open country and small settlements of less than 2,500 persons that are not in the vicinity of the densely populated suburban areas known as urban clusters.

To select schools that were high-performing and high-needs as well as rural, 3 years of consistent school achievement data were sought; however, given changes in state assessments, only 2 years of state achievement data were available to select the sample. Three states in the central region—Colorado, Wyoming, and Missouri—had comparable, recent data available across the 2 years in both mathematics

and language arts. Using these state achievement databases, rural schools were identified whose students' proficient and advanced-proficient levels in mathematics and reading were above their respective state averages in both 2003 and 2004. To select high-needs schools from this group, we planned to use CCD statistics on free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) with the goal of identifying rural schools whose FRPL percentages were above the overall mean in their respective states. However, we discovered that few of the rural schools in our high-performance group met this criterion. Therefore, we calculated average free and reduced-price lunch percentages for rural schools (rather than all schools) by level in each state, and then used these to identify schools that were high-needs and high-performing when compared with their rural counterparts. Within the states of Colorado, Missouri, and Wyoming, 10 elementary schools and 11 junior-senior high schools (primarily grades 7 through 12) met these criteria. The elementary schools ranged in size from 138 students to 358 students with a mean of 244 and a median of 261. The upper grade schools ranged in size from 20 to 1490 with a mean of 248 but a median of 129.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Findings

Phase One Data Collection

Phase One data were collected from interviews with principals of the identified schools. A phone interview protocol (see Appendix A), developed and piloted by McREL staff, was used to better understand specific rural practices to which the HPHN school principals attribute their academic success. The telephone protocol has open-ended questions to elicit the principal's initial thinking about factors of success for the school, and then addresses 19 named factors. These factors, detailed below, are the 13 from the earlier HPHN study as well as six selected for potential relevance to rural schools (e.g., recruiting and retaining high quality teachers). For the named factors, the principal was asked first whether he/she perceived that the factor was critical to the school's success. If principals responded positively they were asked about the significance of its contribution. Three different responses were coded: 0 = not a factor; 1 = somewhat a factor; and 2 = a very important factor. For very important factors, the interviewer probed for specific practices that were perceived to be of primary importance to this success. The 19 factors, grouped by key components, are:

Under leadership: 1) shared mission and goals, 2) principal as change agent, and 3) principal as instructional leader.

Under instruction: 4) individualization of instruction, 5) instructional resources, 6) alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, 7) programs

for special needs students, 8) programs for ELL students, and 9) structural supports for learning (such as academic policies and the organization of the school day).

Under professional community: 10) teacher recruitment, 11) teacher retention, 12) professional development, 13) teacher collaboration, and 14) teacher involvement in leadership.

Under school environment: 15) use of student data, 16) high expectations for all students, 17) parent involvement, 18) safe, drug-free school, and 19) discipline.

The shaded factors are the six added to those used in the HPHN study. Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was added; it was not needed in the earlier study because the approach of that study was systemic in nature and the relationship among factors a key finding. From an earlier article by our colleagues published in this journal (Arnold et al., 2005) we selected all of the remaining five factors except programs for ELL students from the top ten strands of rural education research. We added the factor on ELL students based on our own experience in working in rural schools in the High Plains states and from a report on child poverty in rural America (O'Hare & Johnson, 2004).

Phase One Data Analysis

The data from the 21 principal telephone interviews were analyzed to discern the perceived relative importance of the 19 factors. Findings were reported as frequencies of factors rated very important (2) or somewhat important (1). Content analysis of the open-ended responses as well as elaborations of factors rated very important resulted in themes.

Phase One Findings

The top four factors perceived to be very important by the largest number of principals were: high expectations for students (16 principals), structural supports for learning (15 principals), use of student data (14 principals), and alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (11 principals). For three more factors— teacher retention, professional development, and individualization of instruction—10 principals perceived them to be very important. If both ratings (very important and somewhat important) are considered, two of the leadership factors emerge in the top seven: the principal as instructional leader and having shared mission and goals. Teacher retention and professional development drop into the next tier (See Table 1). Also of interest are the factors not rated as contributing to success.

Table 1
Top Seven Factors as Rated by Principals

Top Seven: Very Important	Top Seven: Very and Somewhat Important
1. High expectations for all students	1. High expectations for all students
2. Structural supports for learning	2. Structural supports for learning
3. Use of student data	3. Use of student data
4. Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	4. Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment
5. Individualization of instruction	5. Individualization of instruction
6. Teacher retention	6. Principal as instructional leader
7. Professional development	7. Shared mission and goals

No conclusions from these were drawn, but it is interesting to note that strategies to assist English language learners were not perceived as contributing to success (only one principal rated it somewhat important) in a time of increasing influx of these students into rural areas.

Analysis of the open-ended data identified three themes of success: community characteristics, organizational support for effective instruction, and support for teachers.

Community characteristics. A prominent theme was the central role of the school in the community. Many school buildings, elementary and secondary alike, provided venues for weddings, craft shows, Chamber of Commerce meetings, and social activities. The schools also were major employers in their towns. Principals also mentioned that their communities are invested in the success of the schools. Several principals noted that community members played multiple roles in the community and school; parents and grandparents were bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teachers, and administrators. Financial commitments from local school boards, fundraising assistance from parents and local businesses, and volunteers to drive students to events or to sponsor extracurricular activities were all examples of the ways the entire community, not just those with children in the schools, supported the school.

Organizational support for effective instruction. Five components were identified for organizational support for effective instruction. Alignment of curriculum and assessments with standards was named as a key component of student success in secondary schools. Subject area courses had clearly identified goals with specific standards identified by course. For elementary schools, educators mapped standards to grade level and created a continuum across grade levels. The establishment of clear goals (between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, and the

community and the school) was another component that many principals perceived as key to the success of their schools. Principals met frequently with teachers in both formal and informal situations as well as collectively, in small groups, and one-on-one to discuss student progress. In addition to stating clear learning objectives, teachers also met independently with students more than once during each assessment period to share thoughts on academic strengths and weaknesses.

Another component was the use of data to inform instruction. Teacher-, district-, and state-created assessments were used by the majority of schools to not only identify instructional strengths and weaknesses but to also differentiate instruction for specific student needs. The structure of the school day was also important. Uninterrupted 90-minute reading blocks were common among the elementary and middle schools. Rotating schedules, 60- to 90-minute class times, and common reading times were prevalent in the high schools represented in the study. Finally, it was also obvious from the interviews that each school had established a culture of high expectations for both student and teacher performance. In this case, the schools' communities also expected excellent instruction and principals believed that students excelled because of this.

Support for teachers. There were four components of support for teachers. The provision of opportunities for teachers to collaborate during the school day was indicated by many principals as an important part of their students' success. Common planning times for lower- and upper-grade teachers or teachers of related subject areas allowed time for teachers to meet. Late-start or early-release days for students also provided opportunities for teachers to discuss academic and behavior strategies or to design instructional plans for specific students. Secondary principals identified informal

conversations taking place between teachers between classes as supportive of group decision making during teacher meetings. Secondly, the rural schools represented in this study all had high teacher retention rates. Principals attributed the high retention rates to teaching environments that were supportive and fostered personal growth. Several principals also identified their schools as being part of communities that are desirable places to live, featuring, for example, proximity to national parks, access to outdoor activities such as rock climbing, hiking, hunting, and snowmobiling, and strong family values.

Third, principals reported respect for teachers' professional development. Many principals spoke of ongoing or continual professional development opportunities that were research-based and reliant on external expertise. Finally, the personal connections teachers have to their schools were also identified as important contributors to the success of schools. Many teachers either are graduates of their schools or have children who attend. More so, principals identified the commitment and dedication of their teachers and staff to the students as a primary contributor to the high academic success of their students.

Phase Two Data Collection

In Phase Two, data were collected from a subsample of schools selected to represent different states and different levels. Six schools were selected to receive site visits: two junior-senior high schools and one elementary school in Colorado, one junior-senior high school and one elementary school in Wyoming, and one elementary school in Missouri. All schools agreed to participate except the elementary school in Colorado. The intent of the second phase was to "tell the story" of a small group of HPHN rural schools as exemplars for other rural schools. Each visit included a focus group with community members, parents, school board members, teachers, and the principal, as well as interviews with the principal and with teachers who were not included in the focus group. The focus group protocol (see Appendix B) includes questions about each participant's role, what characterizes the school, satisfactions and dissatisfactions, the role of the community in the school, past change efforts, important school aspects, and key elements of success. The interviews were relatively open-ended, with researchers prompting participants for their views of the reasons behind the success of the school. Site visits were conducted in October and November 2005.

Phase Two Data Analysis

Focus groups and interviews during site visits were recorded on audiotape. The tapes were transcribed, and the transcripts corrected for accuracy. One elementary school was dropped from the study because too few interviews

were successfully recorded due to technical difficulties. The remaining transcripts were coded for the 19 factors addressed in the telephone interviews. A series of tables for each school was created, one table per factor. Negative statements mentioning problems were highlighted within the tables. The tables were analyzed to determine which factors were most important to the success of each school, and the highlighted portions were analyzed to determine what barriers to success each school faced. Factor importance was determined by how often it was mentioned by respondents and by the diversity of the respondents who mentioned it (e.g., was it mentioned only by teachers, or by several categories of respondents?). For each school, three to five of the most important factors were selected. The remaining sections of the transcripts were then analyzed for other important themes of success, using the same method as for the factors. The completed case studies contain an introduction describing the school setting, school data, a paragraph about barriers to success, a listing and description of the factors, a listing and description of the important themes, and a conclusion. Once each case study was completed it was sent back to the school for member checking, a process that asks the respondents to verify the accuracy of the report.

Phase Two Findings

Five schools participated in site visits in Phase Two, but only four had useable data. Each school retrieved their individual case studies² to review for accuracy, and each school's principal gave us permission to use its name. What follows is a table of school characteristics (Table 2) and brief summaries of the school case studies, followed by findings across the set. For each school the prominent factors (from the list of 19 factors in the telephone interview) are discussed, followed by important themes that emerged from the interviews.

Sundance Junior-Senior High School. At Sundance, parent involvement, high expectations for all students, and teacher retention emerged as key factors. Both teachers and parents reported that teachers really got to know the parents, which helped them feel comfortable in the school. The principal and the teachers agreed that local parents had high expectations for their students and appreciated education. Teachers mentioned that they wanted students to understand that high goals are for everyone, whether they are college-bound or not. Parents and teachers said that parents reinforce the school's high expectations, beginning in seventh grade when students enter Sundance. As an expression of their high expectations of students, the principal reported that the school has added more advanced and college-credit courses. The principal mentioned that teachers have input into new

²Full versions available at <http://www.merel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?productID=235>

Table 2
Characteristics of Case Study Schools

School name	Sundance Jr.-Sr. High School	Adair Elementary School	Julesburg Jr.-Sr. High School	Merino Jr.-Sr. High School
State	Wyoming	Missouri	Colorado	Colorado
Grades	7 - 12	Pre-K - 6	7 - 12	7 - 12
No. of Students [†]	196	151	124	148
Teacher FTEs [‡]	16.5	13	9.5	13.5
Student Ethnicity [†]	97% White 2% American Indian 2% Hispanic	99% White <1% Hispanic	80% White 20% Hispanic (10% are ELL)	93% White 5% Hispanic 1% Asian 1% Black
FRPL % [‡]	17% [§]	48%	37%	36%
Setting	Rural tourist area	Isolated rural area	Small rural town	Small rural town
Resources	Employers draw professionals to area, relatively high per-student funding from state mineral rights, state building funds available	Time for professional development once every two weeks, volunteers and funding from the community	Community provides financial and athletic support and an internship program	Out-of-district students provide extra funding, late-start mornings allow for teacher collaboration
Barriers	Shortfalls in activity funding, teacher collaboration difficult due to scheduling	High poverty and low education in community, small tax base, high number of special students	Few employment opportunities in community, declining enrollment, small tax base	Few employment opportunities in community, declining enrollment, small tax base

[†]GreatSchools.net (n. d.).

[‡]U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (n.d.).

[§]The elementary school in Sundance reported a 28% FRPL rate, so this figure is likely to be inaccurately low. Sundance is the only case study school whose FRPL was lower than the state mean, although higher than the Wyoming rural mean.

teacher hiring, so they hire those with whom they can work easily, leading to higher retention. A nearby college provides master's degrees for current teachers, so they do not have to leave to continue their education, and proximity to a state with lower teacher salaries also keeps teachers from leaving strictly because of money. Teachers and the principal said that high teacher retention is a key factor in the success of the school because it leads to consistency and stability, which help school improvement efforts take hold.

The themes that emerged at Sundance were community support, extracurricular activities, and a "great kids" mindset. Parents, community leaders, and teachers all said that the school is the community in Sundance. Its performances, events, and games are the social center of the town; one parent said, "It really fills a need for the community, because really, what else is there? We don't have a lot of distractions." All students do community service through social studies classes and help out at the elementary school. In return, the community helps fund extracurriculars and provides busi-

ness partnerships that give students real-world experience. School personnel, parents, and community leaders said that Sundance has a high rate of student participation in all extracurriculars. Teachers suggested that extracurriculars are important because they give students a reason to be at school other than academics, give them success experiences, and encourage them to participate in the school community. A community member noted that the well-known music program in particular involves many students, “from the non-popular to the most popular. They’re all in there participating and seem to be equal in that program.” Parents, community leaders, and especially teachers credited the students for the success of the school: “We have a great bunch of kids.” One teacher mentioned that because so many of the students are children of former students, they come to the school ready to work hard, and that because teachers know the students’ parents, “We don’t have kids who act out very much for that reason.” Students encourage each other to be involved in school, and although they are competitive, students are willing to help one another academically, teachers commented.

Adair Elementary School. For Adair Elementary, the important factors as reported by focus group and interview participants were use of student data, parent involvement, high expectations for all students, and teacher professional development and retention. The principal and all teachers we spoke with emphasized the focus on testing at the school, including state assessments, reading tests, and other assessments provided by publishers. The principal said that in order for testing to provide useful guidance for teaching, it is important that teachers trust it and believe that it really matters. Even though many people in the town of Novinger are struggling, parents do get involved with the school. Teachers stated that they must be willing to keep parents informed so that they will feel comfortable getting involved in the school. The principal recommended making personal invitations to parents, especially “the last person in the world anybody would expect you to call,” for activities such as putting up playground equipment. When these parents report positive experiences, others may feel more comfortable about joining in. Teachers and administrators said that although the school’s and state’s expectations for students are higher than in the past, students tend to “rise to the occasion” when informed about high goals, which show students that they are valued. School personnel and community members said that Adair students are also held to high standards of citizenship and expected to display respect, independence, and responsibility. Teachers end classes early every other Wednesday for professional development, which is focused on reading, instructional methods, and information on testing performance. According to the principal, the key to effective professional development is having specific goals for it, observing and supporting teachers as they put it into action, and holding them accountable for it: “[I]f you do not have an instructional leader or a curriculum director

or a teacher leader who holds you accountable for what you’ve learned, and gives it purpose, you’ve wasted your professional development.” High teacher retention at Adair means that professional development efforts create expertise that remains at the school, according to teachers.

Prevalent themes at Adair were community support, a culture of caring, and strong leadership. According to teachers and community leaders, the presence of the school itself plays a large part in holding the community together. Despite the difficult lives of many people in the community, the town provides a lot of volunteers; in fact, many people in the community are better able to provide volunteer time than to donate money. According to the principal, the key to getting support from the community is not being afraid to ask, to extend a personal invitation to help, and to let needs be known. The principal and teachers at Adair believe that demonstrating caring and affection for students is very important, especially in light of many students’ difficult home lives. The principal said that although she is often impressed by the resiliency of the children, strong relationships with school personnel are important for kids who do not have them at home: “If that positive association to something has to come from the school, then it’s a duty—it’s your calling to make sure it happens as an educator.” Because the students feel included, accepted, and at home at Adair, they are willing to go to teachers when they have a problem, school personnel stated. In turn, one teacher said, students tend to behave well because they know teachers genuinely care about them: “It’s not just that you’re a body in my classroom, but I care about you. And if you need me, not just academically, if you need to talk to me I’m here to listen.” The principal takes a direct role in the leadership of the school, according to teachers and the principal herself. Because the students are so needy, the principal must expect a lot out of teachers, and “not apologize for it.” However, she has realized that developing professional community among the faculty depends on sharing power and accepting others’ ways of doing things: “And to get through that I had to get over some of my own leadership power things. I had to give it up, and realize that things were going to go better quicker with a team effort.” Teachers said that the principal and the superintendent are both willing to listen to problems, let teachers know they are being heard, and explain decisions that are made, so that they are products of shared reasoning rather than remote mandates.

Julesburg Junior-Senior High School. At Julesburg, the most important perceived themes of success were use of student data, structural supports for learning, high expectations for students, and teacher retention. Both principals (the high school and elementary principals share superintendent duties) and teachers said that an intense focus on student data is in part responsible for student success at Julesburg. In addition to examining state assessment data, Julesburg uses computerized adaptive assessments in language arts,

mathematics, and science. Teachers said that now they can identify precisely in which topic areas students need improvement to meet state standards, and differentiate instruction appropriately. Struggling students participate in a mandatory assistance program during the regular school year, even if they have to forego desired elective classes to do so. Teachers and the principals also reported high expectations for the students. For example, the principal reported that new, more stringent graduation requirements were recently adopted, along with a tougher attendance policy. The principal commented that the way that administrators and teachers do their jobs—caring about what happens at the school, being prepared and purposeful, expecting a lot of themselves—communicates that they expect no less from the students. The longevity of the teaching staff was repeatedly identified by teachers as a contributor to high student achievement, because it makes it easy for teachers to work together for the success of the students. One teacher described a feeling that teachers are “making it for the future. . . . They have the big picture in mind. And it’s not on a yearly basis; I mean it’s forever down the road. And I just feel here that we’re all on the same page striving for exactly the same thing, and I think it makes a difference.”

At Julesburg the prominent themes were strong administrative leadership and community support. Many of the changes credited with increased student achievement at Julesburg were put in place by the principals/co-superintendents. Although some teachers reported feeling some initial hesitancy about new policies, they agreed that in the end the teaching and learning environment improved. Administrators and teachers said that administrators monitor teacher performance closely, but that they also support teachers through professional development, particularly in data-driven and differentiated instruction. One teacher said, “If [I] go to the administration and say I want this, I need this to teach, and here’s why, they purchased it or helped us out.” Due to the small size of the town, many teachers and administrators play multiple roles within the community through a variety of civic organizations. Principals and teachers said that this gets school personnel connected with the community, which aids teacher retention, and helps create a feeling of trust and support between the community and the school. As with other rural towns, some feel that the town would not exist without the school; one community member said, “This place is the heartbeat of this community. If these doors shut and didn’t open again . . . this town would just sort of wither away.” At the same time, the school relies heavily on the community for financial and athletic support and student internships. One teacher also mentioned that the community tends to support the school’s goals and provide good parenting for their children, and “without that schools wouldn’t be successful.”

Merino Junior-Senior High School. At Merino, the important perceived factors of success were structural

supports for learning, high expectations for students, and teacher retention. Classes are kept relatively small in order to support high instructional standards and allow for more individualized teaching, and there are late-start mornings for teacher collaboration. Teachers and the principal all said that a move to block scheduling has helped student learning, because students and teachers alike focus on fewer courses at once with greater intensity. The graduation requirements were also recently raised, as in Julesburg. Teachers and parents said that student expectations are higher at Merino than at other area schools (Merino has a tougher grading scale, for example), and that this drives the school’s success because it encourages the students to strive harder. Within the school, teachers said that they know their colleagues and their students so well that they all reinforce other teachers’ expectations: “She [scolds] so and so for not finishing their art project. And I say ‘How’s your paper coming?’ That makes the kids feel like everybody’s looking out for everything.” At Merino, high expectations extend to extracurricular activities as well. The principal and teachers said that Merino is known for having students who win science competitions and state and national leadership posts. The principal and teachers noted that teacher retention is very high, which helps create a stable school climate and a feeling of bonding with their students as they have them in class for multiple years. When asked why teachers tend to stay, many said that they are from the area; however, many teachers also said that they were free to conduct their classes the way they felt best, and that this level of autonomy makes them feel that they are trusted and valued. Overall, teachers said that the school environment empowers them and creates a sense of ownership, which encourages them to stay.

The prominent themes emerging from Merino were administrative leadership, community support, a culture of caring, and extracurricular involvement. Both teachers and administrators said that the nature of administrative leadership at Merino helps the school continue to be successful. According to teachers, the principal creates a comfortable environment for change by presenting new ideas and supporting teachers’ efforts to innovate. The principal said, “I really believe that if you want buy-in and ownership from your school and community they have to feel like they’ve been part of the process from the very beginning.” According to teachers, the administration has a lot of faith in them to do their jobs and they appreciate the lack of micromanagement. As with other rural schools, all respondents said that the school is essential to the community; the community and the parents support the school, and in turn the teachers and students support the community. While some rural schools focus only on their immediate surroundings, Merino extends the idea of “community” to the entire state and beyond. Teachers and administrators encourage students to enter state contests and take students to activities in the Front Range metropolitan area, such as dinner theater and skiing. Teach-

ers also reach out through the Internet, for example having science research students contact university professors to ask about their own research work. As the principal said, he is “trying to create more of an awareness of the world we’re going to live in and how we have to interact and cooperate and help each other, rather than just our community.” Parents, teachers, school board members, and the principal all described a culture of caring in the school. Parents, especially, said that it is obvious that teachers have “care and concern for each child.” One parent commented, “I don’t think you’ll find teachers that care about our students like ours do. I just think they go above and beyond their call of duty.” Parents said that because teachers feel that teaching is more than just a job, they give a lot of themselves and also expect a lot out of the students. For example, the school considers character along with grades in recommending membership in the National Honor Society. At Merino, almost all students are involved in some kind of extracurricular, according to teachers. The principal said that students do well when they have an attachment to school beyond just attending classes. Students form close relationships with the teachers who coach and advise clubs; in turn, students perform better in classes because they do not want to disappoint their coaches and advisors. In addition, extracurriculars give students more opportunities for higher-level thinking and project-based work, along with leadership and social experience, said school personnel.

Common Themes of the Case Study Schools

Reviewing common themes across all four schools revealed that each has a close and mutually supportive relationship with the community. In each case, people commented, “The school is the community.” Community members and school personnel share the perception that if the school were closed, the community would essentially cease to exist. The school is a point of pride, a social and events center, a source of help provided by teachers and students, and a building used by many other groups. In return, the community provides financial, volunteer, and moral support.

Two other aspects of all four schools are high teacher retention and expectations for all students to work hard and perform to the best of their ability. Retaining teachers helps develop a supportive professional community, leads to close relationships between students and teachers, and provides continuity that supports curriculum innovations and school improvement plans. Teachers in these schools reported staying out of a desire to maintain longstanding community ties; a feeling of being supported by administrators, fellow faculty, and the community; and a desire to remain in a school where they feel empowered to help students. School personnel at each site made it clear that they have high expectations not only for student effort and academic achievement, but also for appropriate behavior. In this way,

an environment is created in which focusing on learning is made easy. Parents and community members said that they supported the teachers and the schools in these expectations. How schools pursued academic achievement differed (e.g., despite their high state assessment scores, only two of the schools were focused strongly on testing). Nevertheless, teachers and principals said that students are able to “rise to the occasion” when it is made clear that ambitious learning goals are for everyone.

For three of the schools, administrative leadership emerged as a significant theme. For two of the three, the principals took a fairly directive approach and kept careful watch over the teachers to ensure that they were performing appropriately in the classroom. Nonetheless, teachers at these schools said that the principals gave them a lot of support for implementing curricular change, provided particularly relevant professional development as a result of their knowledge of the classroom environment, brought people together for the good of the school, and appreciated their efforts to mentor other teachers. At Merino the principal described himself as a “service-leader type.” The faculty said he presents visionary ideas for the teachers to decide themselves, collaboratively, how to implement. Teachers said they appreciated the feeling that the principal and school board have faith in them.

Finally, themes present in two of the schools were the use of student data, parental involvement, the structure of the school to support achievement, emphasis on extracurricular activities, and a culture of caring.

Conclusions

Much of what was learned would not be a surprise to anyone familiar with education in the current environment.³ Using a set of 19 factors generally associated with high-performing, high-needs schools, the top 7 factors reported by principals are those reported as important in all school settings (Marzano, 2000). Further probing in telephone interviews yielded a first look at the unique qualities attributed to these successful high-needs, rural schools by their principals. The communities in which these schools are located are strongly connected to their schools through formal partnerships, the centrality of the school facilities, and personal investment of community members’ time and money. As with other successful schools, the schools themselves are focused on qualities that lead to student achievement such as aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment; clear goals; and the use of student data to inform their work. Within the various aspects contributing to teacher effectiveness, smaller rural

³In this preliminary study we did not interview or visit low-performing, high-needs schools. Therefore, we cannot say which of the factors and themes found in this study are unique to these schools and differentiate them from low-performing schools.

schools capitalize on the closer relationships among smaller faculties and the teachers' connectedness to the community and personal investment in the school.

The case studies added detail to these findings including the voices of teachers, parents, and the community itself. Not only are the school and community interconnected, but the strong positive nature of the connections seems to lend support to both. The school is an essential element in the community and the community's support makes success possible, often with fewer fiscal resources. The community-school connection also provides support for the high academic expectations found in each case study school. These rural areas have a less transient population, which means that many residents, including parents of current students, went to the school themselves and therefore identify with it. This likely leads to a more trusting community-school relationship in which parents are more likely to support teachers' and principals' efforts to hold students to high standards even when it might have seemingly negative short-term consequences for individual students, such as having to take a remedial math class instead of a favorite elective. This bond between the town and the school is a characteristic of small rural schools that may not be found in nonrural small schools, such as those being created in urban districts where parents have no pre-existing relationship to the school.

Finally, we believe the superintendent or principal, often the same person, plays an important role. Close relationships, both among individuals and between school and community, are characteristic of smaller schools. The principal's ability to thrive in these conditions and adapt to unique characteristics of the school and community is critical. Successful rural schools result from the leadership these principals provide within the context of the local environment.

The close connection of school and community that facilitates principal leadership and high expectations for students warrants further investigation. This exploratory study provides the first steps in more definitively understanding the unique factors that support success in rural schools. It may in fact be a combination of factors that determines success in these schools. The next step is to compare successful high-needs rural schools with those not succeeding, and with small, successful, nonrural, high-needs schools in order to isolate factors found predominantly in successful rural schools, if such exist.

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Appendix A
Rural HPHN Telephone Interview Protocol

My name is _____. I'm from _____, a regional resource for schools. One of our services is researching promising practices and reporting results to educators. Your school has been identified as a successful rural school in terms of student achievement. I'm calling to ask you to share the factors that have contributed to that success. Would you be willing to talk with me for about 20 minutes? If not now, could we set a time this week or next? All your responses will be kept confidential—the report will aggregate across schools and no one school will be identifiable.

To what do you attribute your school's success? (*Probe for at least three things.*)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

What is your school doing that other rural schools might not be doing?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

To dig a little deeper, I'll name a list of possible factors. Please consider each factor in light of your rural situation. If the factor has contributed to your school's success would you say it is somewhat important or very important? (*Score 0 for not important, 1 for somewhat important, and 2 for very important. If very important, probe for what the school is doing in that area; and policies or practices.*)

Teacher recruitment	0	1	2	
Teacher retention	0	1	2	
Professional development	0	1	2	
Teacher collaboration	0	1	2	
Teacher involvement in leadership	0	1	2	
Individualization of instruction	0	1	2	
Resources to support instruction	0	1	2	
Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards	0	1	2	
Programs for special needs kids	0	1	2	
English Language Learners	0	1	2	
Focus on student learning	0	1	2	
Shared mission and goals	0	1	2	
Principal as instructional leader	0	1	2	
Principal as change agent	0	1	2	
Use of student data	0	1	2	
High expectations for all kids	0	1	2	
Parent involvement	0	1	2	
Safe, drug free school	0	1	2	
Discipline	0	1	2	

Is there anything else that you would say has contributed to your school's success?

How many years have you been at this school as principal?

Other:

Appendix B
Rural HPHN Case Study Focus Group Protocol

Preparation:

1. Test audio equipment & label tapes.
2. Arrange seating.
 - a. Use a single table/grouping and ensure that all seats have access to audio
 - b. Place name cards – should be double-sided with names

Introduction:

1. Introduce team.
2. Restate purpose of focus group: to tell the story of school's success (“We selected _____ school by comparing the achievement test results of rural schools in x states with the percent of students they serve that are at risk. Then we interviewed the principals of that group of schools and selected 6 that we felt should have their stories told for others to hear.”)
3. Explain how focus group will be conducted:

“We’d like your perceptions on your school. We have a series of questions we’d like to ask, and we would like to hear from each of you. We’re taping, but only to make it easier for us to be in the conversation and not busy taking notes. You will not be identified by name in the case study unless we receive your permission, and the school name will only be revealed if that school so chooses after reviewing the story. For audio purposes, we’d appreciate it if one person spoke at a time. We also request that you speak loud enough for the microphones to record your words. You are all here because you have something to contribute to the school’s story. And we won’t need to reach consensus – there may be different perceptions and that’s OK.”

Discussion:

1. Introductions—

We’d like to begin by each person introducing himself/herself. Could we start here and go around the circle? Please state your:

- a. name
- b. job
- c. connection to school

2. Perceptions of school

If a friend from another town asks you about _____ School,

- a. how do you describe your school?
- b. how do others describe your school? (others – other community members or area residents external to the school)

3. What differentiates your school from other schools in your area?

4. If you were to choose a car to represent _____ School, what kind of car would it be and why?
5. Current and past satisfactions/dissatisfactions
 - a. What do you most satisfied with about this school?
 - b. What are dissatisfied with about this school?
6. Community aspects
 - a. What is the role of the school in the community?
 - b. What is the role of the community to the school? (prompt for specifics if necessary)
7. Past history of change efforts
 - a. Has _____ School always been a successful school? As you think back over the last several years, were changes made that were important to the school's current success? (If not, skip to 8)
 - 1) What were those changes?
 - 2) How did the changes come about? (prompt for specifics if necessary)
8. Important aspects/barriers
 - a. What important aspects of this school contribute to its success?
 - b. How have these aspects helped make your school successful?
 - c. What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school?
 - d. What have you done to overcome these barriers?
 - e. What kinds of support for success are available to the school? (prompt for specifics if necessary)
9. Other elements of school's success
 - a. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you feel is an important element to the success of _____ School?
 - b. Is there anything anyone would like to add before we end our recording?

Thank you to each of you for your input. Your thoughts are much appreciated and are crucial to capturing the story of your school's success.