

Classifying Extraordinary State Policy Strategies for Assisting Rural School Districts

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The great diversity existing in most state systems of elementary and secondary education has increasingly complicated the state constitutional mandate to provide for a system of "common schools". The development of policies that are intended to provide differential treatment for different components of the state school system is one strategy the states are adopting for addressing this issue. This article singles out what are regarded to be extraordinary state strategies targeted on rural systems and then classifies these in two ways that should aid in the assessment of the equity, adequacy, responsiveness, and appropriateness of the initiatives. The initiatives are classified according to their perceived intent and the primary state policy instrument(s) used for their implementation.

Introduction

As Wise (1972) observed a number of years ago, the constitutional requirement that a state must establish or maintain a "uniform", "common", "general", or "thorough and efficient" state school system is well established. It also seems apparent that the grand vision of state constitutional language creating the state school system has resulted in an unending and perhaps endless pursuit of that hard-to-grasp construct equal educational opportunity. Though a universally accepted definition of the construct remains elusive, it does seem clear that a state's role in its pursuit has been compounded in recent decades by the emergence of a number of legal principles that have sought to: eliminate race as a determinant of access (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954); apply due process rights protected by the U.S. Constitution to students and teachers (Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 1969); eliminate local wealth as a determinant of access (e.g., Serrano v. Priest, 1971; Robinson v. Cahill, 1972; Horton v. Meskill, 1977; Dupree v. Alma School District, 1983);

render as unacceptable a handicapping condition as a determinant of access (e.g., Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth, 1971); repudiate local wealth in urban districts as a determinant (e.g., Abbott v. Burke, 1990); eliminate gender as a determinant of access (Title IX); reduce geography as a determinant of access; and, introduce an adequacy criterion as a second standard by which to judge equality of opportunity (e.g., Rose v. The Council for Better Education, Inc., 1989).

The broadening legal definitions of the construct equal educational opportunity have without question complicated the state's long-standing constitutional mandate. But these developments represent only one, albeit an important one, of the current challenges facing the states. Other pressures that are not based on legal rationality alone also warrant renewed state attention and a commitment of state energies. One of the most important of these is, of course, the unmistakable emergence of the state as the principal planner, and, in many cases, the primary initiator of proposals for the redesign of public education that have flowed from the school reform and school

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excellence movement dominating education policy all across this nation for much of the past decade. That there are higher expectations of the central and pivotal role that the states must play in the redirection of public education should probably be viewed as one of the major sea changes now occurring in this nation's noble experiment with public education.¹

Still another challenge confronting state policy communities seeking to fulfill their expanding legal responsibilities as well as their new leadership roles centers on the growing discrepancies in the wealth and quality of schooling among the three major components of the public school universe that are to be found in most of the states — the urban, the suburban, and the rural components. Some states have responded to the new challenges stemming from this increasing diversity in a variety of ways, by strengthening already existing approaches or by launching entirely new initiatives in areas not generally previously undertaken. The approaches used, while similar in some respects, nonetheless appear to differ substantially in the strategies employed, as well as the assumptions being made in the selection of interventions.

Though generic interventions designed to address the perceived needs of all three components of the state school system continue to be the predominant norm, some states have initiated extraordinary efforts that are targeted on certain sectors of the state system or have established differentiated programs and services based on other factors. For example, in a review of the literature and based on telephone interviews with representatives of 25 state education agencies, Fuhrman (1989) identified seven forms of differential treatment used in some states. The first three of these were labelled traditional approaches to achieve differentiation: formula or project grant efforts that benefit some districts more than others; technical assistance and oversight efforts that reach some

districts more than others; and, administrative waivers from compliance requirements. The remaining four were viewed to be newer approaches used by the states and are primarily related to the emerging focus on school and student performance: performance-based accreditation; rewards and sanctions related to various levels of performance; targeted assistance to low-performing districts; and, flexibility to support innovation.

At the federal level, efforts to begin to acknowledge the diversity present in the public school universe are also being increasingly recognized, although the standardization of federal assistance also continues to be the prevailing norm. For example, in a recent report that sought to identify the scope of Department of Education (ED) programs that by statute or ED regulation were specially targeted on rural, small school districts, Stephens (1990) identified twelve of the 140 elementary-secondary programs administered by ED in 1989 that were targeted on rural districts or that contained a rural set-aside. Most of these were the result of Congressional action and dealt with special populations of students, especially the disadvantaged and handicapped.² A substantial majority of the twelve are of relatively recent vintage. A second example of the movement by the federal government to better understand the existing diversity in the nation's elementary-secondary schools was the completion in 1991 of a proposal by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to alter its current classifications used for describing the universe of private schools. Heretofore, NCES reported data on private schools in two basic ways: Church Related and Non-Church Related or Catholic, Other Religious, Nonsectarian. The new proposal, authored by McMillen and Benson (1991), is designed to better reflect the diversity in private schools and will make use of a nine-category typology based on governance and program type.

¹The states, of course, have long been active in establishing education policy, though some more so than others. For an earlier profile of decisions that tend to be made at the state level, see Campbell, Cunningham, and McPhee (1965). For a more recent cataloging of decisions that tend to be made at the state level, see Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1989).

²Most federal categorical aid to special populations of students is directed toward Chapter I-type programs, the handicapped student, the migrant student, the immigrant student, the limited English proficiency student, and the gifted and talented student (Stephens, 1990). Germane to the focus of this article -- special assistance to rural schools -- the prevailing practice of Congress to be inclined to aid special populations of students led me (Stephens, 1990; p. 280) on another occasion to suggest that "perhaps it is time to consider the merits of promoting a strategy whereby the entire student body in attendance at certain classes of rural schools (e.g., those serving persistent poverty communities, those serving extremely isolated communities) be designated as special populations, warranting an extraordinary federal government response."

Objective Being Pursued

The objective of this piece is to provide additional insight into the apparent increasing interest in state policy circles to better acknowledge the diversity in the state school system in the design of meaningful policies for the improvement of the quality of the state system. In this case, however, the focus of interest is to begin to understand how the states are attempting to provide special assistance to the rural school district component of the state system.

Justification for isolating state efforts that appear to have as their prime objective the provision of assistance to rural systems is warranted in part in that these types of systems continue to be the predominant component of the state school system in a number of states and a major component in an even larger number.³ It is important to know, then, what approaches, if any, are being used to differentiate the needs of these districts.

There should now be little doubt that the rural component of many state school systems remains significant. In the past, only estimates of their number were possible and these ranged from as high as two-thirds of the total number of operating districts in the nation to more conservative estimates of approximately one-half of all operating districts. Work completed last year, however, removes the need for most of the speculation concerning the size of this enterprise. The percent of districts in each of the fifty states identified by Elder (1991) as rural are shown in Table 1. Elder's work is the most definitive thus far undertaken for establishing the type of locale where a school district is located (e.g., city, urban fringe, town, rural) and should put to rest the previous (frequently noble) wide-ranging estimates on the size of this universe of districts. Elder's calculations are based on the Merged File of Common Core Data Public Schools Universe

and Public Agency Universe maintained by the National Center for Educational Statistics.⁴

For the nation in 1989-90, Elder estimated that rural districts represented 47.2 percent of the 15,133 operating public school districts, served 11.8 percent of the slightly more than 39.3 million students, and employed 13.4 percent of the approximately 2.2 million public school professional staff.

An understanding of how the states have targeted this important segment of the public school universe should add to the knowledge base in the emerging discussion concerning the need for even greater differential treatment for the diversity present in most state school systems. Moreover, and importantly, a useful profile of current state initiatives on behalf of rural districts represents a critical step in the ultimate goal of assessing the effectiveness of the strategies. Though an assessment of these approaches is clearly beyond the scope of this exercise, it must ultimately be undertaken if the equity, quality, responsiveness, and appropriateness of differentiated public policies is to be enhanced. It is hoped that this task will benefit from this beginning.

Four questions will be pursued in this exercise:

- * What major strategies are currently used by the states to provide special assistance to rural school districts?
- * What appears to be the primary intent of these strategies?
- * What state policy instruments are commonly used to implement the special assistance efforts?
- * What patterns, if any, are evident in either the primary intent or choice of policy instrument used?

³One of the interesting findings of Elder's (1991) work in calculating the number of rural schools is that in 1989-90, New Jersey, a state having no counties classified as nonmetropolitan in many federal reporting systems, actually had more students in attendance at rural schools (65,799) than did North Dakota (52,336), a state where an overwhelming number of its counties are classified as nonmetropolitan.

⁴The lack of a common definition of what should constitute a rural district in large part explains the reason that only estimates of their number were possible. The development of the "Johnson Code" (Johnson, 1989) and its use by the National Center for Education Statistics made possible for the first time the identification of type of locale where a school was located (the ZIP Code designation of the community as either a large central city, mid-size central city, urban fringe of a large city, urban fringe of a mid-size city, large town, small town, or rural). This new procedure set the stage for Elder's (1991) breakthrough reported on here, and eliminated the heretofore necessity of only providing estimates of the number of rural districts.

Table 1
Percent Rural Districts of State School Systems, 1989-90

Percent Rural Districts ^a	Number of States	States and Percent Rural Districts ^b
91-100	1	North Dakota (92)
81-90	4	Kansas (82), South Dakota (85), Montana (85), Alaska (82)
71-80	2	Minnesota (71), Nebraska (72)
61-70	7	Vermont (65), Iowa (70), Missouri (67), Arkansas (64), Oklahoma (64), Colorado (63), Idaho (64)
51-60	5	Maine (55), Wisconsin (54), Texas (54), New Mexico (55), Washington (57)
41-50	4	New Hampshire (43), Mississippi (44), Nevada (41), Wyoming (47)
31-40	11	Delaware (37), Illinois (39), Indiana (34), Michigan (36), Ohio (40), Virginia (40), West Virginia (40), Kentucky (35), Arizona (40), Utah (35), Oregon (38)
21-30	6	New York (27), Georgia (29), North Carolina (28), South Carolina (29), Tennessee (21), California (27)
11-20	8	Connecticut (14), Massachusetts (13), Maryland (17), New Jersey (12), Pennsylvania (20), Florida (13), Alabama (19), Louisiana (12)
1-10	1	Rhode Island (8)
0	1	Hawaii

^aRural districts are those systems where 75 percent or more of the students attend a regular public school located in a rural locale.

^bPercent rounded to nearest whole number.

Source: Elder (1991, Table 8).

The construction of the profiles presented here were drawn from both individual state files that have been maintained for several decades, and from a companion, loosely structured cross-index file that is used to track state legislative action. The development of a meaningful system to monitor state legislation having implication for education is no easy task, even for what now appears to be the quiet decades of the 1960s and 1970s, as students of school government

will attest. There is no single source that provides a comprehensive content analysis of all facets of legislative developments. What one must ordinarily do is continuously review the publications of a relatively large number of national professional education associations and those of federal and state governments that regularly report on developments in the states. Though these procedures have clear limitations, it does permit one to establish a sense of

the focus and direction of state activity that can then subsequently serve as a useful guide for the development of patterns and tendencies.

Major State Approaches for Assisting Rural Districts and Estimated Extent of Use

As a first step in the identification of specially targeted major state rural assistance strategies, three broad selection criteria were adopted:

Criterion #1: An initiative must be directed primarily at assisting all rural systems in the state school system, even though urban and suburban systems may not necessarily be explicitly excluded from participation in the initiative.

Criterion #2: An initiative must represent what ordinarily would be regarded as the intent of the state to achieve some significant strategic goal, as opposed to what would ordinarily be viewed as a tactical objective for the furtherance of a much broader state strategic goal.

Criterion #3: An initiative must be the result of legislative action or regulatory action stemming from a clear legislative intent, as opposed to having its origin in unilateral steps taken by an administrative agency of state government.

The broadness and to some extent arbitrary and oversimplified nature of the criteria reflects an attempt to adhere to the old axiom that a measuring device must be as complex, but no more nor less, as the phenomenon being measured. Delineating the scope of the exercise in the ways cited above will no doubt exclude some state efforts undertaken on behalf of rural districts. However, it is felt that seeking greater precision by attempting to profile all state actions, a highly problematic undertaking given the volume and complexity of these efforts, especially those undertaken at a dizzying pace in recent years, would likely lessen the value of this beginning exercise.

The use of the first and second selection criteria is perhaps the most arbitrary. For example, several of the initiatives cited below do not necessarily exclude participation by urban or suburban districts (Criterion

#1), but clearly have as their stated goal an attempt by the states to assist rural systems. The promotion of locally-governed, multi-district comprehensive regional services, one of the initiatives cited, for example, though (fortunately!) very active in some metropolitan areas in a number of states, were primarily supported in most states as a way to address rural education issues. Similarly, the promotion of the use of distant-learning technologies, also certainly having equal utility for all school systems, irrespective of type, was initially viewed in an overwhelming majority of cases where it has been advocated and supported by state action as a strategy for assisting rural districts. Additionally, the use of the second criterion excludes a number of efforts undertaken by some states that their supporters might well regard as significant (e.g., the practice by a limited number of state education agencies (e.g., Oklahoma) of creating a rural coordinating unit or rural task force in the agency). These no doubt represent meaningful steps; however, they are viewed here to be tactical, not strategic in their intent.

The use of the three selection criteria resulted in the identification in the literature of nine major initiatives. These are shown in Table 2. Also established in the table are estimates on the extent of current use of each of the initiatives and the time period when a majority of the states making use of them begin to implement the strategy. Several of the initiatives have been used by some states for a number of years and thus predate the intense period of state activity of the past decade. Others have been spawned during this time. The intent for establishing estimates of current use is to indicate approximations, not precise counts. While fairly accurate calculations are available on the present use of some of the initiatives, informed approximations based on the literature are probably best for others.

Moreover, the interest here is not so much establishing the precise number of states making use of a particular major strategy for assisting rural districts. Rather, the focus is on the identification of what these are and then establishing what appears to be the primary intent of the states supporting the use of the initiatives as well as establishing the state policy instrument or instruments commonly used to implement the policy choices once made.

Several observations concerning the current use of the nine major state strategies are offered.

1. The state promotion of the reorganization of small enrollment size districts that was the clear, and virtually sole, policy choice of most states for many decades enjoys only

Table 2
Major Illustrations of State Strategies Having Rural Districts as Primary Intended Target and Estimated Extent of Current Use

Major Strategies	Estimated Extent of Current Use ^a	Time Period Majority Initiated
Seek reorganization of small enrollment size districts into larger administrative units	limited	1930s
Promote use of locally-determined multi-district sharing of whole-grades and/or staff	limited	1980s
Promote use of locally-governed, multi-district regional single-purpose schools for special populations	limited	1960s-70s
Promote use of locally-governed, multi-district regional comprehensive secondary schools	limited	1960s
Seek creation of state network of locally-governed, limited purpose regional service centers	moderate	1960s-90s
Seek creation of state network of locally-governed, comprehensive regional service centers	moderate	1960s-70s
Seek establishment of state network of state-governed, regional technical assistance centers	limited	1980s
Promote use of distant-learning technologies	moderate	1980s
Seek modifications in state funding formula to reflect sparsity; other revenue enhancement plans	majority	1960s

^aEstimated extent of current use: "limited" = ten or fewer states; moderate = more than ten but less than one-half of the states; "majority" = one-half or more but less than three-fourths of the states; "extensive" = three-fourths or more of the states.

limited current use (e.g., North Dakota). Moreover, in some states where the state inaugurated a formal reorganization strategy during the past approximate decade, these plans were ultimately withdrawn (e.g., North Carolina, Illinois, Nebraska).

2. The present widespread use of strategies that would result in some form of collaboration among rural districts in order to create a more favorable critical mass of students, specialized personnel, or resources is clearly the state strategy of choice, though

different alternative ways for achieving this goal are currently practiced. Five of the nine initiatives cited are intended in one way or another to achieve collaboration.

3. In a limited number of states (e.g., Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota), the announced state goal is to promote the use of multi-grade sharing of whole-grades or staff as an intended forerunner to a hoped-for subsequent merger of the participating rural systems.

4. In some instances, a single state is presently making use of two or more of the nine initiatives, side by side. Where this practice occurs, the tendency is to utilize multiple strategies for (again!) achieving a degree of collaboration among rural districts. For example, Iowa for several years now has provided incentives for rural systems to share staff and whole grades. It has had a statewide system of comprehensive regional service centers in place for several decades. A number of other states, especially those in the Midwest (e.g., Minnesota, Ohio) have followed similar approaches of making use of multiple initiatives, though not always the same mix.
5. The relatively extensive use of strategies intended to promote collaboration would also seem to reflect a conscious shift in state policy circles to focus on the requirements for the production of needed services (the concentration of students and resources) rather than on emphasis on the expectation that each rural system must both produce as well as provide a needed service.
6. In the promotion of the various forms of collaboration, preference for the use of some form of local governance continues to be the clear choice of state planners.
7. The limited current use of a state network of state-governed regional technical assistance centers reflects the general national pattern of state education agencies choosing to concentrate their energies on planning for, rather than directly operating, a new initiative. The two major exceptions to this pattern in recent years are the relatively new statewide and state-operated regional staff development centers in Kentucky and Louisiana.
8. The current relatively widespread use of modifications in the state funding formulas that are intended to be more favorable to rural systems can follow several forms: the use of a weighted enrollment or other sparsity factor to address the demonstrably higher unit costs of especially small rural

systems, grants for "approved and necessary" small schools, and other factors (Honeyman, Thompson, and Wood, 1989). Though many of these practices predate the past decade, a number of states have initiated special rural adjustments in their state aid formula in more recent years. This may be a reflection of the heavy volume of litigation challenging prevailing state funding practices in the 1970s and again in the late 1980s. In a number of the most recent state court actions, rural systems have been one of the prime initiators of litigation that challenges current state practice (e.g., Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio).

A Description of the Classification Systems Used

As established earlier, the objective pursued here is to initiate a way for better understanding extraordinary actions taken by the states to address one important source of diversity that permeates most state school systems, those strategies that target rural districts. Two basic classification systems will be used to establish what, if any, discernable patterns are evident in how the states make use of the nine major strategies identified. The two classifications center on (a) what appears to be the primary intent of the initiatives and (b) what state policy instrument(s) are commonly used for their implementation.

These two initial foci are warranted in that both are clearly important prerequisites for the ultimate assessment of the worthiness of the strategies. One must, of course, be mindful of Dunn's (1981) sobering caution that it is generally recognized that there are no known techniques that permit one to know with absolute confidence whether or not the bases selected for a classification system are the right ones to use. Dunn's position on this issue is that the rationale for any classification system ought to center on the analyst's purpose for engaging in the exercise. The prominence Dunn gives to purpose is widely shared by others who have engaged in typology work (Blau and Scott, 1962; Etzioni, 1961; Hrebiniak, 1978; Luloff, 1987; Mintzberg, 1978; Parsons, 1960).

The two classification systems used are what would be called by Luloff (1987) a constructed typology. Citing McKinney (1966), Luloff defines a constructed type as:

purposive, planned selection, abstraction, combination, and (sometimes) accentuation of a set of criteria with empirical referents that serve as a basis for the comparison of the empirical cases. Through the use of such devices, the myriad phenomena of a social action or situation are reduced to a more-coherent level. The result is not literal; i.e., it is not a representation of a unique circumstance (or set of circumstances). Rather, through reduction, the constructed type represents an objectively probable (empirically relevant) source of action, situation, etc. (p. 85)

Primary Intent of the Initiatives

What, then, do the states seem to have in mind in support for the use of one or more of the nine strategies? That is, what state policy goals or multiple goals do the initiatives being pursued appear to be directed toward? And, notwithstanding the likelihood that a number of the nine initiatives have multiple objectives, what appears to be the primary intent of state action, as opposed to any possible secondary or complementary objectives?

For purposes of this exercise, use will be made of four categories of intent for establishing the primary goal of the strategies:

- * enhancement of the quality of the instructional program of rural schools,
- * enhancement of the quality of programming for special populations of students in attendance at rural schools,
- * enhancement of the quality of the professional staff of rural schools, and
- * enhancement of the institutional capacity of rural systems.

Justification for the use of these four categories is based on several lines of argument. On the one hand, a number of useful efforts in both education and in other fields to type organizational change intervention strategies undertaken by organizations themselves or directed toward them by an external unit regularly give prominence to the four themes. For example, Sashkin and Egermeier's (1991) recent synthesis of the literature, which includes an impressive review of a

large number of school change models and processes that spans much of the past quarter-century, ultimately developed four classifications that they argue tends to account for most education change strategies undertaken during this period. The four categories are: fix the parts, fix the people, fix the school, and fix the system. Though the labels of the four categories used in this exercise differ, they are nonetheless very similar, but not quite comparable, to Sashkin and Egermeier's typology. The four classes used are close enough, however, to suggest that they provide a useful perspective for categorizing state initiatives designed to assist rural education.

The second line of argument for the use of the four categories for classifying state-adopted rural initiatives used here, as opposed to Sashkin and Egermeier's system or other useful change typologies (Chin & Benne, 1969; Herriott & Gross, 1979; Herriott, 1980; Daft, 1983; Huse & Cummings, 1985; McLaughlin, 1989), is that the four capture many of pervasive, widely acknowledged needs of rural districts. Extraordinary state policy development on behalf of rural education is ostensibly based on some understanding of and agreement on the nature of the problem that is to be addressed. The clearer the connection is between the policy strategy used and the need being addressed, the better, presumably, is our understanding of the fit between the responsiveness and appropriateness of policy action and need. Several examples are offered below for illustrative purpose:

- * The category "enhancement of the quality of the instructional program" can be easily associated with the near-universal difficulty of rural systems in adding breadth and depth to their instructional program, especially at the secondary school level (Barker, 1985; Monk, 1987).
- * The category "enhancement of the quality of programming for special populations" can be easily associated with the problems that many rural systems face in serving students with handicapping conditions (Helge, 1981; Helge, 1984), the gifted (Howley, 1986; Howley and Howley, 1988), and those receiving vocational-technical training (Jansen, 1988; Ross & Rosenfeld, 1988).
- * The category "enhancement of the quality of professional staff" can be easily translated to

a common need of rural systems to recruit and retain specialized instructional staff, especially in crucial academic core fields (Pelton, 1983; Horn, 1985).

- * The category "enhancement of the institutional capacity of rural systems" is quickly recognized as a need to address common concerns that many rural systems lack the planning and technical expertise to solve their instructional and organizational problems, or lack a critical mass of students or fiscal resources to offer needed comprehensive programming effectively and efficiently (Stephens & Turner, 1988; Monk, 1990; Salmon, 1990).

Policy Instrument(s) Commonly Used

The second classification of the rural initiatives undertaken by the states on behalf of rural districts examines these efforts from the perspective of the state policy instrument, or combination of instruments, commonly used to implement the decision once made by a state to offer extraordinary assistance. As established earlier, establishing patterns of this type that might be evident allows one to begin to uncover the apparent assumptions being made in state policy circles in the choice of one approach, rather than others, for assisting rural districts. It also allows one to begin to offer conjectures concerning the costs and benefits of the use of the approaches. Both insights are essential for the ultimate assessment of the quality, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness of existing state actions designed to assist the rural component of the state school system.

It is to be stressed that our interest here is on uncovering any patterns that might exist in the type of policy instrument or instruments commonly used by the states to implement the nine strategies used. No attempt is made to assess the much more compelling interest in the policy instrument choices made by the states to implement decisions to support one strategy or tactic rather than others. This complex undertaking is clearly beyond the limited objective of this exercise but, it is hoped, will benefit from this initial exercise.

Howlett (1991) defines a policy instrument "as the generic term provided to encompass the myriad techniques at the disposal of governments to implement their public policy objectives" (p. 2). A number of ways to classify these have been offered. One of the most useful for our purpose is the typology of state policy instruments developed by McDonnell and Elmore

(1987). The four generic classes of instruments used by these authors to classify state approaches in the implementation of state policy objectives are:

- * mandates: rules governing the action of individuals and agencies, intended to produce compliance,
- * inducements: the transfer of money to individuals or agencies in return for certain actions,
- * capacity-building: the transfer of money for the purpose of investment in material, intellectual, or human resources, and
- * system-changing: the transfer of official authority among individuals and agencies to alter the system by which public goods and services are delivered (p. v).

McDonnell and Elmore also establish what they regard to be the expected effects and the major assumptions generally made by advocates of each of the four policy instruments. These are outlined in Table 3.

Applications of The Two Classifications And Discussion

The results of the application of the two classification systems to the nine major state initiatives that satisfy the selection criteria used here are shown in Table 4. In the designation of the primary intent, only one of the four categories of possibilities (the enhancement of the quality of the instructional program, programming for special populations of students, the professional staff, or the institutional capacity of rural systems) is identified. This procedure is followed in order to establish what appears to be the single, overriding goal of state action, even though it is recognized that it is quite possible that state decision makers anticipate (correctly so, most would concur) that a number of other, secondary efforts are likely to flow from the implementation of a strategy.

On the other hand, in the designation of what is judged to be the state policy instrument commonly employed to implement a strategy, multiple instruments are frequently cited. This is done for the obvious reason that this practice is frequently engaged in state policy circles.

Table 3
 Expected Effects and Major Assumptions Made in the Use of the Four Policy Instruments

Instrument	Expected Effects	Major Assumptions
Mandates	compliance	1. action required regardless of capacity; good in its own right 2. action would not occur with desired frequency or consistency without rule
Inducements	production of value (short-term returns)	1. valued good would not be produced with desired frequency or consistency in absence of additional money 2. individuals, agencies vary in capacity to produce; money elicits performance
Capacity-building	enhancement of skill, competence (long-term returns)	1. knowledge, skills, competence required to produce future value; or 2. capacity good in its own right or instrumental to other purpose
System-changing	composition of public delivery system; in-control	1. existing institutions, existing incentives cannot produce desired results 2. changing distribution of authority changes what is produced

Source: McDonnell & Elmore (1987, pp. 8 & 13).

A number of general observations concerning what appears to be the primary intent of state actions as well as the primary instrument(s) used for their implementation are established below. Four major observations seem warranted concerning the primary intent of state initiatives targeted on rural districts.

1. It is apparent that the perception that many rural districts lack the institutional capacity to offer quality education effectively and efficiently continues to be held by many and that this issue must somehow be addressed in the formulation of a state strategy that will result in lasting assistance to these types of districts. This observation is supported in part by:

- * the continued formal endorsement in some states of the reorganization of small enrollment size districts that presumably will create a new structure that will have a greater

probability of possessing the fiscal and human resources to achieve quality more effectively and efficiently, and

- * the promotion in still other states of the use of multi-district sharing of whole grades and/or staff as a pre-planned initial phase leading to the ultimate merger of the participating districts.

2. A focus on ways to enrich the quality of the instructional program for both the general or special populations of students, or both, by means other than reorganization, is a clear policy goal of many of the state rural district initiatives cited here (and a secondary anticipated goal of still others). However, it is apparent that the states launching initiatives with this primary intent differ on how best to achieve this goal. This general observation is supported in part by:

Table 4
Classification of Major State Rural Strategies

<u>Major Strategies</u>	<u>Primary Intent Appears to be Enhancement of the Quality of</u>	<u>State Policy Instrument(s) Commonly Used</u>
seek reorganization of small enrollment size districts into larger administrative units	institutional capacity or rural systems	mandates and/or inducements
promote use of locally-determined, multi-district sharing of whole-grades and/or staff	instructional program of rural school	inducements
promote use of locally-governed, multi-district regional single-program schools for special populations of students	instructional programming for special populations	inducements and system-changing
promote use of locally-governed, multi-district regional comprehensive secondary schools	institutional capacity of rural systems	inducements and system-changing
seek creation of state network of locally-sponsored, limited-purpose regional service centers	instructional programming for special populations	inducements and system-changing
seek creation of state network of locally-governed, comprehensive regional service centers	instructional program of rural schools	mandates, inducements, and system-changing
seek establishment of state network of state-governed, regional technical assistance centers	professional staff	mandates and system-changing
promote use of distant-learning technologies	instructional program of rural schools	inducements
seek modifications in state funding formulas to reflect sparsity; other revenue enhancement measures	institutional capacity of rural systems	mandates

* the judgment here that a majority (five of the nine initiatives) are viewed to have the enhancement of the instructional program as the primary intent of state support, and

* the further assessment that not all of the five initiatives are presently supported by an individual state; rather, the prevailing practice is that a state will actively endorse but one of the initiatives.

3. Those cases where a state will promote two or more of the initiatives simultaneously represent a paradox. These practices may reflect uncertainty

concerning the relative costs and benefits of different approaches for assisting rural systems. Or they may be attributable to the unique political traditions, or socioeconomic and geographic characteristics, of a state. Uncovering the causes of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this effort.

4. Only one of the nine state strategies is judged to have as its primary intent the enhancement of the quality of the professional staff. Though this outcome is no doubt a function of the construction and use of the classification system used, it nonetheless comes as somewhat of a surprise given the critical importance of the quality of the instructional and administrative personnel of an educational enterprise, rural or otherwise.

Four major observations seem warranted concerning the state policy instrument(s) used to implement the initiatives undertaken by the states on behalf of rural districts.

1. It is apparent that some states are willing to go outside the existing structure of the state school system and promote the creation of new delivery systems where it is felt that doing so is the best policy choice to follow for providing assistance to an existing configuration of rural districts. This observation is supported by the judgment that no less than five of the nine strategies represent the creation of a new governance arrangement for the delivery of services in the state system of schools.

2. The use of inducements, either singularly or in combination with another instrument, is the clear policy instrument of choice by the states to implement a strategy once decided upon. Seven of the nine initiatives were launched with the use of some form of fiscal incentives to either install and then maintain an initiative (e.g., the creation of regional service centers), or to encourage the active participation of rural districts (e.g., whole-grade sharing or sharing of staff). Of importance, four of the five initiatives judged to be implemented by the use of system-changing techniques were also accompanied by the use of inducements.

3. The exclusive use of mandates to implement an initiative is rare. In three of the four instances where mandates were employed, they were joined by the use of a second instrument. In two of the four initiatives, where mandates were employed as the state policy instrument of choice, rural interests would likely view these as beneficial as well as nonthreatening (e.g., state-governed regional technical assistance centers, modifications in state funding formulas).

4. Surprisingly, the states do not make use of what would be viewed as capacity-building instruments to implement strategies to assist rural districts.

Summary and Concluding Comments

There appears to be growing awareness in the policy circles at the state levels that policies designed to improve the state system of elementary-secondary education must increasingly be differentiated in recognition of the great diversity that prevails throughout much of the public school universe in virtually all of the states. This exercise attempted to add to this emerging interest by first isolating extraordinary state strategies that target the rural school component of the state school system and then classified these in two admittedly largely arbitrary ways: first, according to

what appears to be the primary intent of the initiatives; and second, by the state policy instrument(s) commonly employed for their implementation.

Nine major state initiatives were selected as representing extraordinary state efforts. A majority of these call for the promotion of some form of collaboration among rural districts, although it is clear that honest differences exist by advocates of different strategies concerning how best to achieve this overarching goal. A substantial majority of the nine initiatives were judged to have as their primary intent the enhancement of the quality of the instructional program for both the general and special populations of students. Improvement of the institutional capacity of rural systems was also viewed to be a prominent state goal. Surprisingly, enhancement of the quality of the professional staff was judged to be the primary intent of only one of the initiatives, although it is acknowledged that this is likely an anticipated secondary effort of the state promotion of several other of the initiatives.

Inducements, especially when joined by another instrument, was the clear state policy instrument of choice for the implementation of the initiatives. The willingness of the state to go outside the existing structure of the state school system and create a new delivery system to implement an initiative intended to assist rural districts is also quite common. Where this is practiced, it is usually accompanied by inducements. The fourth generic state policy instrument, capacity-building, was not judged to be used for the implementation of any of the nine initiatives.

The exercise reported on here should prove useful for the initial framing and testing of propositions concerning both the intent of extraordinary state efforts that target rural systems and the policy instrument(s) of choice used for their implementation, as well as how these might be associated. Inquiries along these lines would add important insight for the assessment of the equity, adequacy, responsiveness, and appropriateness of both existing or planned specially designed state action to provide differential treatment for what continues to be a significant component of the vast majority of state systems of elementary-secondary education.

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