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HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE RURAL DISTRICTS: WHAT IS THE SECRET SAUCE?

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J.A. and KATHRYN
ALBERTSON FAMILY
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• ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS •

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) was launched by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation of Boise, Idaho during the summer of 2013. Since then, Bellwether Education Partners and a task force of experts led by Dr. Paul T. Hill have been working to foster a better understanding of the issues that affect rural education, inform policy discussions, and bring attention to the unique needs and circumstances of rural school children. A series of reports, published over the next year, will examine issues including migration, technology, human capital, economic development, postsecondary enrollment and persistence, and more. Papers will be posted online at www.rociidaho.com/research-publications.

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ABOUT ROCI • RURAL OPPORTUNITIES CONSORTIUM OF IDAHO



ROCI brings together some of the nation's best thinkers to conduct research on the challenges of rural education and identify innovations, programs, and models to address them. This effort informs a national body of work on rural education and explores implications for increasing the educational attainment and economic competitiveness of Idahoans and Americans.

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The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation is a Boise-based, private family foundation committed to the vision of limitless learning for all Idahoans. Since 1997, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation has invested almost \$700 million in Idaho. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation honors the legacy of Joe and Kathryn Albertson, founders of Albertsons grocery store, however it is not affiliated with Albertsons LLC. Grant-making is by invitation only. For more information, visit jkaf.org.

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• INTRODUCTION •

The rural schools narrative is usually a tale of deficits: they are expensive, they lack teacher talent, their graduates don't do well in college. And, generally, the data from rural districts confirm that narrative. Yet in 2014, an earlier paper in this series found there's another part of the story, one that suggests being rural might actually be an asset. The earlier paper discovered that a higher portion of remote rural districts fall into the category of being "productivity superstars"—outliers in that they exhibit higher outcomes than would be predicted by their mix of students and access to funds. This paper replicates that analysis with a more recent dataset, and then sets out to understand what it is that makes a remote rural district a productivity superstar.

• REMOTE RURAL DISTRICTS: A CHALLENGE AND AN ASSET •

It's true that, on average, remote rural districts live up to their reputation of providing lower returns on the education dollar. Updating our previous work by incorporating a more recent (2011) dataset from the Center for American Progress (CAP), we find that districts categorized as remote rural¹ continue to post the absolute worst average return on investment (ROI) across urban, suburban, and town school districts (see **Figure 1A**). In other words, remote rural districts on average exhibit lower outcomes relative to statewide norms than would be expected given both their level of spending and their mix of student needs.

Many remote rural districts are productivity outliers, beating the odds by producing higher than expected results without a proportionately higher per-pupil price tag. These districts have outcomes that greatly exceed those predicted by their mix of students and by their available funds when compared with other systems in their state.

Again, the new dataset demonstrates the other side of the story—namely that many remote rural districts are productivity outliers, beating the odds by producing higher than expected results without a proportionately higher per-pupil price tag. The Center for American Progress Production ROI index² categorizes districts into six levels of productivity, with those in the most productive level referred to here as productivity superstars. These

districts have outcomes that greatly exceed those predicted by their mix of students and by their available funds when compared with other systems in their state. In fact, as **Figure 1B** shows, based on our analysis of the newer data, rural districts have the highest odds of being

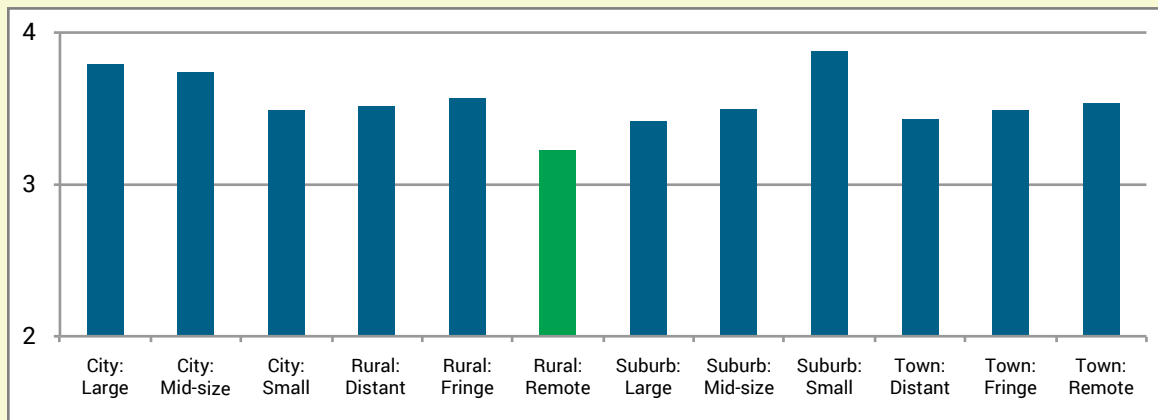
productivity outliers—with 25 percent falling into this highest productivity category—compared with other district types (urban, suburban, and town). For all districts, the probability of being a productivity superstar is 15 percent; for remote rural districts it's 25 percent.

• Figure 1 •

A MIXED STORY: REMOTE RURALS HAVE LOWER AVERAGE PRODUCTIVITY BUT HIGHER ODDS OF BEING A SUPERSTAR

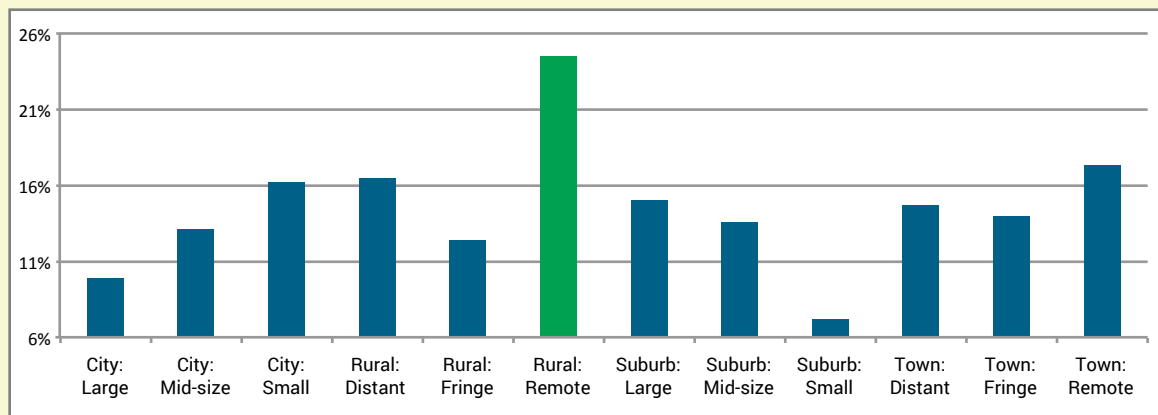
Productivity averages lowest for remote rural districts (on a scale of 1 to 6)

A



The odds of being a productivity superstar are higher for remote rural districts

B



For this study, we wanted to find out how these outlier rural districts are so productive. We wondered whether (or how) rural factors of isolation and small size could foster conditions that spur the unusually efficient use of funds. Does the interconnectedness and smallness of these communities translate into increased accountability for kids’ results? Are districts that are too small to have formal programs and bureaucratic specialization better able to capitalize on the strength of specific staff or community members?

No single program or expenditure explains these highly productive rural districts’ results.

We hoped to find a silver bullet—but it soon became clear there wasn’t one. Common themes emerged, however: the importance of human relationships (with an emphasis on people over programs), ingenuity, strong commitment to

meeting the needs of students and resourcefulness in doing so, strategic use of data on student needs and progress, a clear focus on making tradeoffs between alternative expenditures, and an understanding of what investments buy in terms of outcomes. We found no single program or expenditure to explain these highly productive rural districts’ results. But we did find a starting point to potentially better understand rural productivity.

We contacted all of the 107 superstar ROI remote rural districts in 23 states identified from the CAP data. Thirty of these 107 superstar districts, representing 18 states, responded to our request for a phone interview.³ As **Figure 2** shows, despite the relatively low response rate, the districts interviewed had demographic characteristics that reflected the total pool of superstar remote rural districts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF REMOTE RURAL PRODUCTIVITY SUPERSTAR DISTRICTS

• Figure 2 •

	Interviewed Superstar Remote Rural Districts	All Superstar Remote Rural Districts
Total Number	30	107
Average		
Enrollment	1,075	1,184
Free and reduced-price lunch	54%	59%
White	83%	82%
Hispanic	11%	9%
Black	3%	6%
ELL	2%	3%

We talked to leaders (mostly superintendents) in those 30 districts and asked them what they thought accounted for the productivity results they achieved.⁴ Our findings are therefore purely qualitative, based on a small sample, and offer only a first look at what might explain such high productivity. We hope future studies can comprehensively analyze the productivity superstar school systems' budgets, staffing, and other system details so as to drill down further into the factors that might explain their high productivity.

To be clear, not all 107 productivity superstar districts post student scores in the top tier for their state. CAP's productivity measure compares students' *actual* performance with the district's *predicted* performance relative to peers, taking into account the mix of students and total resources. A district with a high concentration of poor students or students with limited English proficiency may have higher achievement than is the norm for that mix of students, and higher than the norm at a particular spending level, but still have overall performance that doesn't match the highest scores in the state. Only districts where students' actual performance significantly beat predictions (given student mix and funding level) were considered ROI superstars.

While spending varied somewhat across the remote rural productivity superstar set, these highly productive districts spent, on average, about five percent less than the typical rural district in their state. Still, these outlier rural systems performed better than predicted given the mix of students they serve and the funds they have at their disposal.

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• EXAMINING SOME POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS •

We wanted to make sure we weren't missing an obvious demographic factor beyond rural remoteness that could explain districts' high productivity.

Could it be a homogeneous student population? When compared to all other types of districts (rural, town, suburban, and city), the remote rural superstar districts do enroll a higher percentage of white students (82 percent). However, when looking at only remote rural districts, the superstar districts enroll about the same percentage of white students as less productive remote rural districts, averaging 77 percent of total enrollment in these regions. Racial homogeneity doesn't appear to be the defining factor in the highest ROI districts.

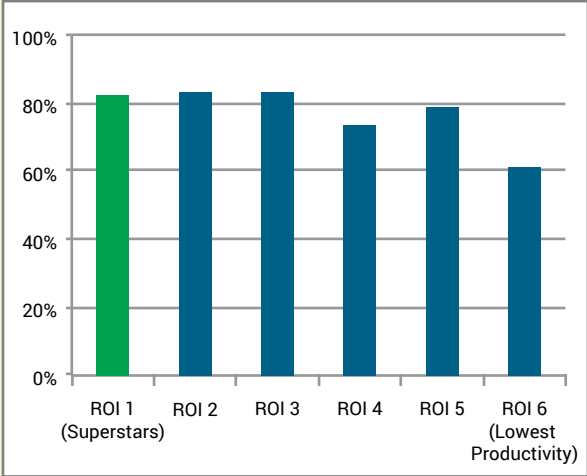
Could it be the population's relative affluence? Here again, the evidence suggests not. Remote rural ROI superstar districts enrolled roughly the same percentage of poor students (59 percent) as their remote rural peers with lower productivity (57 percent).

Could it be district size? Remote rural ROI superstar districts aren't significantly smaller or larger than other remote rural systems. The ROI superstar districts studied here ranged in size from 500 to 2,000 students, again, the same average size as their lower-productivity remote rural counterparts.⁵

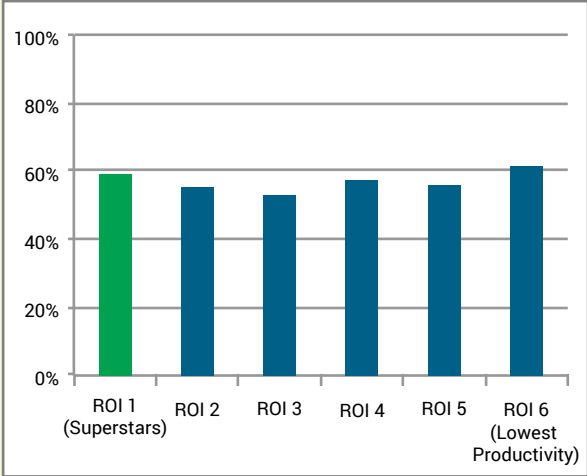
• Figure 3 •

COMPARING STUDENT ENROLLMENT ACROSS REMOTE RURAL DISTRICTS

A White Students



B Students Living in Poverty



• WHAT REMOTE RURAL ROI SUPERSTAR DISTRICT LEADERS TOLD US •

In our phone interviews with the 30 outlier remote rural district leaders, it became increasingly clear that each district is its own, unique ecosystem. Some are primarily farming communities. Others center on a main employer, like a hospital or small factory. Still others rely on retirees or tourism. We found no single factor or program that leaders pointed to in explaining their high productivity, but some common themes emerged.⁶

IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS, STAFF, AND THE COMMUNITY



Our motto is ‘small school, big family.’ Our staff will do what it takes. It’s all about the relationships. Teachers work hard to create those relationships. The students work as hard as they can because they don’t want to let the teachers down.

MARLEN CORDES
Superintendent, Kaleva Norman Dickson Schools, Brethren, Michigan

Strong relationships weren't a given in these small, rural communities; their leaders prioritized relationships and put real effort into building and sustaining them. However, these relationships played out in a variety of ways among our high-ROI districts.

Students as individuals

Our respondents regularly mentioned efforts to focus on students as individuals, such as finding ways to motivate and engage each student. Leaders worked to develop a culture of ownership, leaving no one behind. Several superintendents mentioned adopting a mastery model toward teaching. In these schools, students were not allowed to fail.

- In Holyoke, Colorado, the district changed its grading policy so that students who don't score a 70 percent or better on an assignment or test have to keep doing the work until they do. If they don't bring their homework, or don't get their work done during the day, students are required to stay after school to finish.
- The Sheridan, Wyoming schools build in time each day for students struggling with a given concept, enabling them to get extra help from teachers and be reassessed until the teacher is confident that the student understands the material.
- In Mason, Texas, teachers offer remediation for certain subjects during "Prime Time" Fridays. (Students who don't need the help participate in enrichment activities).

Data as a means to identify strengths and weaknesses of students and teachers, not for system management or compliance

For many superintendents we spoke with, every number is a person. The data they pay close attention to aren't summaries across broad categories; they use data to track and follow through with individual students. They use student performance data to find and help struggling students. Districts had a clear process for reflecting on what worked and what didn't work and for making future budget decisions based on that evidence. They also used data for planning professional development and making staffing decisions.



In a small setting, you get familiar with your students' strengths and weaknesses. You have the opportunity to do that in a rural district because you don't have that many kids. If you don't take advantage of that opportunity, then you aren't going to be successful.

CHRIS STEVENSON
 Superintendent, Harper Independent School District, Harper, Texas

All teachers in the Crivitz, Wisconsin school district attend an annual summer data retreat to set explicit goals and timelines for evaluating data throughout the year. The state evaluation system requires teachers to set goals for themselves (known as SLOs, or student learning outcomes). Crivitz teachers set their SLOs based on gaps surfaced from the summer data retreat and tweak their practice as needed to meet the goals. Teachers review benchmark tests during the school year; if gaps surface for certain students, teachers and administrators together craft a plan to target them.

"We have 50 teachers, 50 student learning outcomes that are connected to that data retreat. Each teacher is attacking the data gaps in his or her classroom," says Superintendent Patrick Mans.

Staff buy-in and mutual respect

Many superintendents reported having grown up in the rural area where they now work. And some intentionally sought to hire people from the local area, people these leaders thought would stay and feel committed to the locality.

Overall, we heard an emphasis on getting and keeping the right people. Several leaders also emphasized the importance of letting teachers leave the district if they were not willing, or able, to perform according to the high standards expected of them. Many leaders mentioned the significance of creating an environment of buy-in and leadership among the teaching staff. Some districts achieve this by creating professional learning communities (PLCs) while others provide teachers with the latitude and resources to do what they feel works best.



We expect a lot out of the people we have...The people we attract, the majority of our applicants, are folks from the area. They came through our schools and they have pride coming back. They know what it was like, they understand the culture and expectations. They don't want to mess up. They want to do great.

RYAN HOLLINGSWORTH
Superintendent, Marion County Schools, Hamilton, Alabama

Community as a partner

Stakeholder groups overlap in these small rural areas. People are not segmented by profession, neighborhood, or religion; everyone has some membership (e.g., in a church or the stands at high school games) that puts them in contact with almost everyone else. Local business leaders aren't simply members of a remote business community; they are also local parents and voters. Parents and teachers all mix together in supermarkets, churches, and social groups.



Our administrative team will be at almost every event: athletic, college night, community fundraisers. Almost all of us are there. People recognize us. So we build trust. Then when we have to have hard conversations, it goes better. They know us. They know we care about the kids and the community.

DENNIS PHELPS

Superintendent, Pekin Community School District, Packwood, Iowa

In Colorado's Holyoke School District Re-1J, schools asked their teachers to weigh in on the district's student achievement goals. Wanting to get more community support and teacher buy-in, the local school board asked the superintendent to convene a team of parents and local businesses to consider and comment about the goals, too. The community team said the goals weren't high enough, so teachers and administrators worked to hammer out new goals.

We did not find that everything was smooth in highly productive districts. Not every highly productive rural system follows the narrative of a tight-knit, cohesive community that wholeheartedly supports its local schools and agrees in lockstep about how best to serve its children and respect its taxpayers' pocketbooks. When divisions arise, however, district leaders work hard to create buy-in with as many members of the community as they can.

FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY, SELF-RELIANCE ARE BROUGHT TO THE TASK OF SCHOOLING

These districts' remoteness seems to foster local ingenuity and resourcefulness. They don't look to others to solve their problems, or claim that someone (the state, the feds) has made it impossible for them to succeed. When trying to articulate what their districts did differently, leaders said success resulted from the staff's hard work and the pride everyone took in the school. Rarely did a district leader say that a program or instructional strategy brought in from the outside was the source of their success.

- In Lincoln, Wyoming, teachers created their own professional development program, which other districts around the country have now adopted.
- In Delhi, New York, the district stopped paying for its regional career and technical education program (purchased through New York State's BOCES, the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) in order to create its own career-technical college program in partnership with a community college across the street. District leaders say they are saving money while being able to offer students more courses.
- In Rabun County, Georgia, the district made sure it was an early participant in a new state initiative involving greater autonomy in return for more accountability. By being one of the three districts in the state that volunteered to be part of the pilot program, it gained more freedom from state rules and regulations and was able to leverage that flexibility to push further on its district efforts. Superintendent Melissa Williams said, "We wanted to get in on the ground level so we could be part of the conversation." Autonomy mattered a lot to the district, and the superintendent wanted to make sure future policies protected that autonomy.

CONSCIOUS TRADEOFFS

We asked how these highly productive districts were able to develop effective schools without spending more on average than their peers. District leaders talked about problem-solving and the conscious financial tradeoffs they made to better support students.



The discretionary money we have to spend is small compared to our budget. But when we do have extra dollars to spend, it's always on instruction.

MARK PLATT

Superintendent, Hart Public Schools, Hart, Michigan

Even districts that emphasized the importance of attracting and retaining quality teachers did so because they believed that good teachers are in a better position to support students. Alan Allred, superintendent of schools in Lincoln, Wyoming, says his is one of the state's poorest districts—but he has the state's second-highest teacher salary schedule. The district leveraged funding intended for nurses and other staff to be able to attract top-quality teachers.

Superintendent Chris Stevenson in Harper, Texas, gives all staff—from the lunch lady to the superintendent—a holiday bonus from \$800 to \$1,200 in years when the district budget allows and student performance warrants it. “We felt like we wanted an incentive plan that we could celebrate as a district, and if we aren’t doing well, then we work on it together,” Stevenson says. He notes that the district doesn’t have a lot of teacher aides or support staff and that when someone leaves or retires, the district looks very closely at whether or not to restaff the position.

RESPECT FOR COSTS AND CAREFUL STEWARDSHIP OF PUBLIC FUNDS

Leaders in superstar districts are frugal, aware of what everything costs and determined to get the most out of every dollar. They are willing to abandon an activity that's not paying off, and they don't assume that every change in the schools will require new money. As a group, they appear cautious in asking their local community for money and only ask when they must.

Kevin Newsom in Brackettville, Texas, became superintendent as his district was again trying to raise \$7 million to replace a building. Several of his predecessors had tried to pass bonds to pay for this but were unsuccessful, straining community relations. When Newsom came in, he reassessed the building plans and concluded that a renovation of the existing building would be better and cheaper. "So for \$600,000 we added tiles, remodeled, and gave that building a facelift." Then, using modular buildings, the district spent \$1.4 million to put in a 10-classroom facility with computer rooms, a biology lab, and rooms for a nursing program. The district used a workaround to tap existing money to pay for the renovation and addition. "We didn't pressure our taxpayers and we got done what we wanted for \$1.4 million versus \$7 million," Newsom says.

Anthony Marinack, superintendent of the Tri-County Area School District in Plainfield, Wisconsin, was one of many respondents who articulated the need to work strategically with the haves in a community to avoid fundraising burnout (knowing whom to ask, when to ask, and being very careful about how often you ask).

"You have to get creative in how you are going to get funds. You have fundraised them [the community at large] to death. Families can't afford it," Marinack says, noting roughly 60 percent of his students are poor enough to be eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. "I hit up the wealthy potato farmers in my area every now and then to support our great programs. ... If I need sports uniforms, I try to hit up a farmer who's had a good year."

WHAT WE *DIDN'T* HEAR FROM RURAL LEADERS IN ROI SUPERSTAR RURAL DISTRICTS

Many education buzzwords prominent in state and federal policy debates were largely absent from our conversations. We didn't hear buzzwords like school turnaround, data-driven instruction, or teacher evaluation system. We heard Common Core mentioned only once and never heard "No Child Left Behind" or "Race to the Top," or any mention of state accountability systems.

In addition to the things leaders brought up in our interviews, we think it's worth noting what they *didn't* say. Many education buzzwords prominent in state and federal policy debates were largely absent from our conversations. We didn't hear buzzwords like school turnaround, data-driven instruction, or teacher evaluation system. We heard Common Core mentioned only once and never heard "No Child Left Behind" or "Race to the Top," or any mention of state accountability systems. (Title I was the program most frequently

mentioned, usually in terms of how school leaders deployed these dollars creatively while not running afoul of rules around how to spend them). Overall, these state and national policy efforts didn't appear to be the driving force behind the high productivity in superstar rural districts.

We heard nothing around labor conflict or the need to navigate a dense district bureaucracy to get things done. And we didn't hear superintendents fearing for their jobs or navigating school board changes from recent elections. It is not surprising that these kinds of conditions are less common in remote rural settings, and the absence of them did seem to matter as superintendents were able to stay focused on students.

HOW CAN POLICIES SUPPORT DISTRICT PRODUCTIVITY?

Although our findings are not conclusive, there are some takeaways that might help inform state and federal policy—especially as those policies are intended to promote greater student outcomes amid limited funds. For instance, the findings here suggest that state and federal lawmakers might:

Recognize the limits of state and federal policy

Our evidence suggests that there was no one thing the state or federal government did from the top down to boost productivity. Rural leaders in superstar ROI districts rarely mentioned federal programs in our productivity conversations.

Encourage (don't interfere with or try to replace) local problem-solving

Policymakers at the state and federal level should be wary of trying to address problems with a one-size-fits-all approach, for example, requiring every student to take an online class or instituting a statewide teacher pay-for-performance plan.⁷ Small rural districts can often

Blanket state requirements can bog down rural systems and force them to spend money in ways that are inefficient given their unique setting. Further, states should support local leaders' focus on using data related to outcomes, not on processes or compliance.

meet the spirit of such initiatives, but mandated input-oriented compliance requirements often don't make sense in their rural context. Blanket state requirements can bog down rural systems and force them to spend money in ways that are inefficient given their unique setting. Further, states should support local leaders' focus on using data related to outcomes, not on processes or compliance.

Allocate funds based on students and student characteristics

This enables fair, flexible funding so districts can use funds as necessary. Building funding systems on fixed assumptions about staffing, cost reimbursement, and other inputs constrains decisions for rural communities. To ensure that rural districts aren't at a resource disadvantage, states can match local fundraising in low-property wealth areas so communities do not have to rely solely on raising local dollars.

Interestingly, the three states with the lowest percentage of remote rural ROI superstar districts (Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Arizona) have finance systems that treat rural or small districts differently than their peers, effectively driving up the spending part of the ROI equation.⁸ Pennsylvania and Arizona specifically supplement small districts; Arizona also subsidizes isolation. Tennessee's formula includes minimum staff allocations, escalating spending in smaller districts.

Our analysis challenges the assumption that rural schools must be funded differently to ensure that they offer services in the same way as more densely populated areas. And it seems to challenge the assumption that rural districts can't leverage their funds effectively to get the most for their students.

Don't be fooled by the promise of consolidation

Highly productive remote rural districts demonstrate that small size and isolation may be an advantage mistaken for a problem. Consolidation might inhibit the very conditions that make superstar ROI results more likely in isolated rural districts. If districts want to share services, there are ways to make that happen. If districts want to consolidate, it should be on their own terms, not mandated by above, so that consolidation doesn't disrupt local ingenuity and what it can do for students.

Develop ways to identify high-ROI districts

States have an important role in ensuring that data systems exist in order to measure and identify highly productive schools and systems. While many states do have data systems that focus on student performance, few weave in the financial data needed to accurately measure productivity (or ROI). In our conversations with district leaders, some didn't even realize that they'd measured high on a ROI index, as they'd never seen that kind of dataset before. Colorado and Ohio are two states developing information systems to measure ROI among their districts and schools.

Promote networks for rural principals and superintendents to share learning and provide training opportunities

Rural leaders need finance and leadership training and a chance to share what works. Sharing productive and innovative practices will allow local leaders to pick and choose those strategies or approaches that may work in their own community.

• IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER RURAL DISTRICTS •

To improve ROI in other rural communities, these findings suggest that district leaders could consider the following:

- 1 Focus on people: students, teachers, and the community.** There was no silver bullet program or expenditure answer to the productivity puzzle, but higher productivity rural districts appear to see their students, teachers, and community members as people, not stakeholders.
- 2 Make relationship building a clear part of district leaders' strategy.** Smaller isolated communities have the opportunity to leverage their more personalized relationships to their advantage, but this won't happen automatically. Effective leaders know how to tap the talent and resources of those in their system, and put them to work in ways that generate the greatest outcomes possible for the students they serve.
- 3 Stay focused on maximizing outcomes using available resources.** District leaders might ask: Are there lower-cost ways to get things done? Is the expenditure working to produce the outcomes we expected? Which tradeoffs work for a specific community? How can I solve the problems we have with the resources and capacities available to us?

These implications may be relevant for non-rural school systems as well. Larger school systems may need to encourage more problem-solving at the school level, where community ties may be tighter. And all school systems can make sure that data can be used at the school level, tied to students, rather than just generating systemwide reports across broad categories of data.

We're a long way from making claims that urban and suburban districts should adopt the same approaches as rural districts and expect to get the same results. But it does give us pause to consider whether, in relying so much on systems in the schooling process, we've lost some of the human elements to schooling that may prove an advantage. Perhaps there are ways for larger districts to see the benefits associated with small communities—whether by fostering stronger relationships with their neighborhoods, or by forging connections between school staff and families.

• CONCLUSION: THERE IS NO SECRET SAUCE, OTHER THAN SELF-RELIANCE AND A FOCUS ON PEOPLE •

Even though we tried to find common practices that might explain these rural systems' results, we came away from our interviews with a strong sense that every highly productive rural district has found its own way to success—one that is rooted in its own unique local context, with its own mix of variables that may contribute to its secret productivity sauce. We have no magic productivity plan to offer, no “adopt program X and you'll get stellar result Y” or “make tradeoff X and you'll save Y dollars.” As we've seen, every remote rural district is its own story.

One of those stories belongs to Pendleton, West Virginia, which sits 40 miles west of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and some 175 miles from Washington, D.C., with an estimated countywide population of roughly 7,300. Tucked into the Potomac Highlands, bordered by the headwaters of the South Branch of the Potomac River, the local economy relies on timber, agriculture, and the tourists who flock to rock climb and hike the Monongahela and George Washington National Forests. In 2006, Pendleton County Schools were dead last in math—55th out of 55 school systems in the state—and 45th in reading. In 2014, the district ranked in the state's top 10, and Pendleton County Schools Superintendent Douglas Lambert was named superintendent of the year.

Perhaps Lambert sums it up best. “There are no magic bullets,” he says in trying to explain his district's productivity. “We roll our sleeves up, we embrace change with the information that is needed to make those changes. Everyone is slow to change. It's hard. I pleaded to their [the community's] inner good and I wear my emotions on my sleeve. I told them we could do better than this. It goes back to the leader.”

“Someone has to build relationships with people,” Lambert adds. “Schools are the last hope in rural communities.”

• END NOTES •

- 1 The National Center for Education Statistics defines a “remote rural” district as a “census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.”
- 2 To compute the index, the CAP analysis uses a regression equation to predict the achievement a district should have relative to other districts in the state given its mix of student needs and its spending level. The regression model adjusts for spending level and the percentage of students who are English-language learners, students who are identified as needing special education, and students who qualify for free lunch.
- 3 The following states have at least one highly productive district but are not represented in the study: Arkansas, California, Indiana, Illinois, and North Carolina.
- 4 See Appendix A for interview questions.
- 5 The dataset we used excluded districts with fewer than 300 students.
- 6 Six of the 30 superintendents were not district leaders in 2010, the year CAP used to determine productivity levels. Therefore, some superintendents could not speak authoritatively about district-wide policies or practices at that time.
- 7 The former was proposed in Idaho, and the latter is in effect in Colorado.
- 8 In our state-by-state analysis of how frequently ROI superstar systems emerged, we included only those states that produced seven or more remote rural districts (this represents 23 of the 39 states in the CAP data file that had any remote rural districts).

• APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS •

1. To what would you attribute your district's high outcomes?
2. What drives your district's spending decisions? How do you make decisions about what your district is going to spend money on and what you have to do without?
3. Is there anything you think your district does that is different from a typical district?
4. Would you attribute any of this to factors in your community? And if so, what?
5. How long have you been a superintendent in the district?
6. Describe your district.
7. What advice would you have for a rural superintendent, in a district very similar to yours, who wasn't getting the same kind of outcomes?

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