



The Productivity of Rural Schools

Superintendent Kevin Newsom in Brackettville, Texas, was faced recently with replacing a \$7 million building in his school district, which sits two hours west of San Antonio. Several of his predecessors had tried to pass bonds to pay for this need but were unsuccessful, straining community relations in a town where roughly one-third of the 1,700 residents live in poverty.

When Newsom had the building re-assessed, it turned out that a renovation would be better — and more cost effective.

“For \$600,000, we added tiles, remodeled, and gave that building a face lift,” he says. Then, using modular buildings, the school district spent \$1.4 million to put in a 10-classroom facility with computer rooms, a biology lab and space for a nursing program. The district used a work-around to spent existing funds 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.

He hopes this will help restore positive community relations and demonstrate to taxpayers that the 600-student Brackett Independent Schools District is fiscally responsible and not

How some remote districts generated higher than expected learning results without proportionately higher spending

BY MARGUERITE ROZA

likely to jump to tax levies as a first solution.

School leaders make tradeoffs like this all the time. But Newsom’s remote rural district is considered a productivity superstar, one of 30 interviewed by the Edonomics Lab at Georgetown University to learn what made them so.

Outliers’ Productivity

Rural school systems are often knocked for being expensive, lacking teacher talent and producing poor student outcomes. On average, remote rural districts live up to their reputation of being expensive and yielding lower student outcomes. They have the lowest average return on investment, or ROI, across urban, suburban and town school districts, meaning that even with their higher costs, rural student outcomes are lower



Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, has identified common factors that explain the productive return on investment in rural schools.

than the state's norm adjusted for the mix of student needs.

But another part of the story suggests being rural might actually be an asset.

Some remote rural districts are outliers, beating the odds by producing higher than expected results without a proportionately higher per-pupil price tag. They're outliers because their outcomes greatly exceed those predicted by their mix of students and by their available funds when compared with other systems in their state. In fact, our analysis shows rural districts have the highest odds of being a productivity outlier — nearly 1 in

5 — compared with other urban, suburban and town districts.

Our study wanted to find out why these productivity superstar rural districts have such good bang for their buck. (Neither homogeneity, relative affluence nor size, compared with other rural remote systems, seemed to play a role.)

Leaders pointed to no single factor or program to explain their superstar status. But as we talked with these superintendents some common themes emerged: The importance of human relationships (with an emphasis on people over programs), strong commitment to and accountability for students, strategic use of data tied to students and a clear focus on tradeoffs and what investments “buy” in terms of outcomes.

While we tried to unearth potential common denominators that might explain these rural systems' assets, we quickly realized that every district has its own mix of variables that may contribute to its secret productivity sauce. And not every highly productive rural system has a tight-knit community that wholeheartedly supports its local schools and agrees in lock-step about how to best serve its children and respect its taxpayers' pocketbooks.

Our conversations offer an impressionistic starting point to better understand rural productivity. Only future study will help us drill down further.

Factor 1: The human touch with students, staff and the community

Strong relationships weren't a given in these communities. Leaders worked hard to build and sus-

Identifying ‘Superstars’ in Rural Settings

To determine whether school systems performed better than predicted, we used the Center for American Progress's Production ROI index. This index predicts the level of achievement a school district should have relative to other districts in the state, accounting for its mix of student needs and spending level.

The 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.

We contacted all 107 outlier districts identified from the data in 23 states. Thirty districts, representing 18 states, responded to our request for a phone interview. We asked leaders in those 30 districts why they thought

they received their productivity results.

To be clear, not all 107 districts identified for their excellent return on investment have produced student scores in the top tier overall for their state. The ranking on CAP's productivity measure compares students' *actual* performance with the district's *predicted* performance relative to peers.

For example, a school district with high concentrations 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 have overall performance that doesn't reach the highest level. Only districts where students' actual performance surpasses predicted performance were considered ROI superstars.

While spending varied somewhat across these districts, on average they spent about 5 percent less than the norm for districts in their state. But all these outlier rural systems performed better than predicted by the mix of students they serve and the funds they have.

The outlier productivity districts we identified are all categorized by the National Center for Education Statistics as “rural remote,” which means the district is in 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.” Some of the districts we talked with are primarily farming communities. Others center on a main employer, such as a hospital or small factory. Still others draw on retirees or tourism.

— MARGUERITE ROZA

tain them. The human touch played out in many ways as these districts sought ways to motivate and engage each student as an individual. Leaders worked to develop a culture of leaving no one behind. Several districts mentioned adopting a mastery model.

“Our motto is ‘small school, big family,’” says Marlen Cordes, superintendent of Kaleva Norman Dickson Schools in Brethren, Mich., where some 70 percent of students in the 350-square-mile district are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. “Building relationships, that’s the best (and most important) thing we do. All our kids eat breakfast in the classroom every day. That’s when teachers really get to talk to the kids. The one thing we have going for us is we know our kids. For many, school is the best part of their day. The students work as hard as they can because they don’t want to let the teachers down.”

Many superintendents grew up in the rural area where they now work. And some leaders intentionally sought to hire other natives who they thought would stay and feel invested. Rural superintendents emphasized the importance of getting and keeping the right people. And they expressed a willingness to let people go if circumstances warranted (be they budget or performance related). Many leaders mentioned the significance of their teachers’ professional learning communities around teacher retention and leadership (giving teachers the latitude and resources to do what they feel works best) and student outcomes.

The “community” in these remote rural districts isn’t some faceless force. Stakeholders in these small communities tend to overlap — local business leaders aren’t some anonymous business community but also local voters and parents — and may be less fragmented than in larger ones.

Factor 2: Sense of flexibility, creativity and self-reliance

These school districts’ remoteness seems to foster a sense of self-reliance and resourcefulness. They seem accustomed to solving their own problems.

The Delhi, N.Y., district stopped paying for its regional career and technical education program at BOCES, the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, to create its own career technical college program with a community college across the street. District leaders say they are saving money while offering students more course options.

A teacher in Wyoming’s Lincoln County School District 2 came up with a homegrown, teacher-led professional development program, known as Fusion, that’s now used districtwide



Chris Stevenson, superintendent in Harper, Texas, tries to provide a holiday bonus of up to \$1,200 for all staff to recognize the sacrifices they make during the school year.

and elsewhere across the country. Teachers choose what area they want to grow in, get time during contract hours to study best practices in that area and are rewarded for improving their skills.

“Our staff development has been huge in growing our teachers,” Alan Allred, superintendent in Lincoln County, says. “People are programs. We invest in our people and we retain them.”

Factor 3: Making conscious tradeoffs

We asked these highly productive school districts how they could afford what they did without spending more on average than their peers. District leaders talked about the problem-solving process and conscious financial tradeoffs they made — many made specifically to be able to better support teachers and, ultimately, students.

Superintendent Chris Stevenson in Harper, Texas, gives all staff, from the lunch lady on up, a holiday bonus of \$800 to \$1,200 based on the district budget (some years it’s not possible) and student performance.

“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.

His 600-student district does without a lot of teacher aides or support staff. And when someone leaves or retires, leaders look very closely at whether or not to re-staff the position.



Doing the Most With What They Have

In interviews the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University conducted with leaders of outlier rural districts — those where student outcomes exceeded predictions — we found each rural district had its own story. What was clear was that every highly productive rural school system has found its own way to success, rooted in its own unique local context, with its own mix of variables that may contribute to its secret productivity sauce. Here are excerpts of what we heard from three representative superintendents.

— MARGUERITE ROZA

BRET MILES

Superintendent in Holyoke, Colo., from 2009-2015

Located 13 miles from the Nebraska border in Colorado's far northeast corner, Holyoke is a predominantly agricultural community with about 600 students in K-12. The community is home to Seaboard Farms, a large hog production corporation.

"I grew up in Holyoke and graduated from the local high school. ... When I came in as superintendent, the school board had identified two main problems ... low levels of teacher buy-in and declining community support.

"Within the district, we built a Standard of Excellence Team comprised of teachers, parents and business leaders to analyze student achievement, set goals and get community buy-in. ... It's this kind of genuine account-



Bret Miles

ability that comes in a small rural district that isn't understood in the bigger picture of the accountability movement. ... "With our budget crunch we had to reduce personnel, fortunately mostly through attrition. We don't have teacher aides for extra classroom support anymore. ... Our base salary hadn't

changed in 10 years. That's not good, but it's our reality. We've just asked teachers to take on more. But our leadership team is a teacher team. Teachers feel valued. Some 90 percent of our teachers say they feel the district is moving in the right direction and they feel supported. ...

"Maintaining that positive climate is an important part of every decision. We go to the teachers to make sure they can get on board with every strategy we implement. ... We've changed our curriculum, grading policies and technology expectations. We've been recognized for closing our socio-economic achievement gap. Some 44 percent of students are Latino and about a quarter are English language learners, some 50 percent are eligible for free or reduced price meals. This was possible only because of the high

staff buy-in. With just 50 teachers, we can really make sure we communicate with and hear from everyone."

PAM KRUSE

Superintendent in Mason, Texas, from 2009-present

On the western side of Hill Country by the scenic Llano River, Mason (population 2,200) sits in one of the state's most rural counties, where farms and ranches dominate. About 700 students are enrolled in the district.

"I've worked in Mason schools for 28 years. ... Our teachers are very involved in individual students' learning so they know what each of them needs. And we've really set up our district so that no student can just fall through the cracks.

"On Fridays, we have 'prime

Factor 4: Respect for costs

Leaders seem to have a general frugality, an awareness of the price for everything and what each dollar bought. They appear cautious in asking their community for money and only ask when it's really needed.

Anthony Marinack, superintendent of the roughly 700-student Tri-County Area School District in Plainfield, Wis., recognizes the need to work strategically with the "haves" in a community to avoid fundraising burnout (knowing whom to ask, when to ask and being careful about how much you're asking).

"You have to get creative in how you are going to get funds. You have fund-raised them (the community) to death. Families can't afford it," Marinack says, noting roughly 60 percent of his students are eligible for federal free or reduced school meals. "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."

Factor 5: Using data to directly help students and teachers versus system management or compliance

Many of the rural superstar superintendents see every number as a person. They focus on using data to identify and help struggling students. Districts had a clear process for reflecting on what worked and what didn't work and making future budget decisions based on that evidence. They also used data to drive professional development and staffing decisions.

About an hour north of Green Bay, all teachers in the Crivitz, Wis., school district attend an annual summer data retreat to set explicit goals, timelines and clear methods for checking and evaluating data throughout the year. The state evaluation system requires teachers to set goals for themselves known as SLOs, or student learn-



Pam Kruse

time' that provides remediation in each subject for the elementary grades. ... In January, we give our benchmark for the tests in the spring. If we see kids who have trouble, we put them into a tutorial group. In junior high and high school, at every level we have remediation built into the schedule. ...

"We spend at least 90 percent of our budget on staff. Of the federal money we receive, approximately 98 percent of that goes to salaries. Our philosophy is the more staff we have, the better off the kids are. ...

"We're trying to upgrade all

of our facilities, but mostly that's an area where we've done without because we wanted to focus on instruction. We have a 1952 school building for preK-8 and a 1976 building for our high school. ... There's not a lot of money here and not a lot of ways to make money here.

"But my teachers go the extra mile ... I have teachers who come up here at 7 in the morning and who are here at 6 at night to tutor the kids. ... I've had teachers from other districts say to me that there's just no place like Mason where everyone cares so very much about the kids. I can't take credit for that. That has always been a part of Mason."

MARK PLATT

Superintendent in Hart, Mich., from 2013-present

About six miles inland from Lake Michigan, Hart sits in an agricultural zone with several fruit and vegetable processing operations. One of the county's top employers is the world's largest maraschino cherry producer. Tourists come for beaches and looming sand dunes. The district enrolls about 1,300.



Mark Platt

"Before I became superintendent, our district had purposely closed outlying schools and created a central campus. ... The first thing we did when I took over ... was start to better manage the things we had control over. We have one campus with four buildings, an early childhood center plus elementary, middle and high school. We have one bus run, with everyone on it from K-12. We've saved a lot of money.

"Those savings let us invest in a consistent, quality elementary school literacy program and every teacher gets trained in it. ... And

we've invested heavily in leadership. It's very important to me that the principals and I be the educational leaders. I don't spend a ton of time on finances; I have a finance director. ...

"Of course, there's value in sending teachers to training, but the staff members I have the greatest return on are my principals. ... Because they are educational leaders, they can create great PD in their own building that's responsive to their school's specific needs. ... We're the only district in our state where all of our principals have gone through a 10-month Leadership Matters specialty endorsement program. It focuses on coaching, collaboration, reflection, courage, intentionality and technology.

"We don't have a lot of discretionary money, but when we do have extra dollars to spend, it's almost always on instruction. We just used general fund dollars for a 1:1 Chromebook program in our secondary school. ... We wanted to give kids greater access to broader course offerings through the Internet."

ing outcomes. Crivitz teachers set their SLOs based on gaps that surfaced during 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 Crivitz superintendent Patrick Mans. The system is "much more responsive and timely" in using student data throughout the school year to make instructional changes.

Factor 6: No magic productivity plan but food for thought

Our superintendent interviews produced no magic productivity plan, no "adopt program X and you'll get stellar result Y" or "make tradeoff

X and you'll save Y dollars." While we need more research to give deeper insight into what makes these superstar rural systems tick, even nonrural leaders may glean something useful from their rural peers' themes:

- ▶ Focus on teachers, students and community.
- ▶ Make relationship-building a clear part of district leadership strategy.
- ▶ Stay focused on the outcomes the money buys.

Our conversations with rural leaders make us wonder whether the broad national focus on "systems" means that many districts (rural and nonrural) have lost some of the human elements to schooling that may prove an advantage in any setting. ■

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