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# THE POLITICS OF K-12 EDUCATION IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: THE CASE OF IDAHO

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## • ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS •

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) was launched by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson 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](http://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.

## ABOUT JKAF • J.A. AND KATHRYN ALBERTSON FOUNDATION



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## ABOUT BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS



Bellwether Education Partners is a nonprofit dedicated to helping education organizations—in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results, especially for high-need students. To do this, Bellwether provides a unique combination of exceptional thinking, talent, and hands-on strategic support.

## • INTRODUCTION •

The formal governance structure of a rural school district is similar to that of an urban district: an elected board, a superintendent, a central office, some form of teachers union or association, and one or more organized parent groups.

But it all works very differently. The same few people are tapped to serve on the school board as to lead other local civic groups. The superintendent might be the only professional employee in the central office, and he or she might also teach or serve as school principal. The superintendent or members of the board might be married to, or a close relative of, the superintendent or a board member. The same might be true with members of parent groups.

How does the small size and relative intimacy of a rural locality affect the politics and leadership challenges of local K-12 education? This paper gives a preliminary answer to that question, based on a small first study of politics and leadership in rural Idaho towns and remote areas.

Based on interviews in six Idaho communities and three in surrounding states, we identified the issues that arise and must be resolved politically in small rural districts, who is normally on which side, and how the superintendent and other leaders seek support and form coalitions. We also focused on the superintendent's role, both in the politics of the locality and as leader of the school district.<sup>1</sup> The questions we asked, including the queries that helped us identify knowledgeable local respondents, are in the Appendix.

We selected localities, with the advice of knowledgeable superintendents, state officials, and the state School Boards Association, to represent communities that differed in size and remoteness from Boise, the state's metropolis. The small size of our sample, and the limited number of interviews we were able to conduct in each locality, marks this as a preliminary study, not a definitive one.<sup>2</sup> Every district we visited had to stand in for many

**Every district we visited had to stand in for many of its type—small town, rural area with no major settlement, near or far from a metropolitan area, one to three schools or as many as 10.**

of its type—small town, rural area with no major settlement, near or far from a metropolitan area, one to three schools or as many as 10. Our results would be deeper and more reliable had we been able to visit several, rather than one, locality of each type.

However, the consistency of our findings suggests that we have uncovered some important truths about rural education politics and leadership, even if we haven't seen everything. In the conclusion, we will suggest how a larger and more formal study could be done.

## FINDINGS OVERVIEW

Running a small rural school district is like quarterbacking a professional football game in a high school gymnasium, trying to run complex plays on a slippery floor 50 feet wide and 94 feet long. A player would need to be extremely skillful to find room to run or catch a pass. It wouldn't work very well.

Rural school districts must educate children in every grade, help children who fall behind and motivate the gifted, and provide special education, transportation, and extracurricular activities. They must do this with tiny central offices, often just a superintendent and a clerk, and with a small number of educators who must play many roles. Rural districts must do a great deal in an environment where there are few college graduates other than the current teachers, and not enough teachers to provide a true specialist in every subject. Moreover, the loss of one teacher through retirement or relocation can leave a hole that is extremely hard to fill.

Education leaders in such districts—superintendents, board members, and principals—are also hemmed in by local politics and community mores that militate in favor of “doing things the way they have always been done.” Ideas from the outside—mandates

from the state government and new methods of instruction, whether introduced by the superintendent or by a newly minted teacher from the university—can meet with resistance and suspicion.

Such tight sidelines are reinforced by distance from population centers with universities, well-resourced school districts, and concentrations of college graduates. But isolation is not merely geographic.

Most rural, agricultural, and mining communities are relatively poor, adversely affected by swings in the larger economy, and buffeted by the vagaries of weather on crops and the impersonal forces of global markets. And yet, the spirit and vigor of the educators, the pride communities take in their schools—even if that is manifested largely in support for the local sports teams—and the estimable work ethic of the people in these small towns and surrounding rural areas finds people there hoping for a better future.

Much has been written about the challenges of leadership in larger, urban school systems. Urban leaders must deal with extremely complex communities with large numbers of mobilized interest groups, including parents, teachers, and businesses. Superintendents are political figures, but seldom as potent or experienced, or as responsible for the whole community, as big-city mayors, councilmen, and members of the state legislature. They must master large bureaucracies and answer to school boards that include politically ambitious individuals who aspire to higher office. They are also likely to be actively covered by newspapers and TV.

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The challenges facing rural leaders are different.<sup>3</sup> District leaders can be the most prominent public figures in their towns. They can't be anonymous, or leave thinking about population declines or the local economy to others. Though rural districts lack complex interest-group environments or big bureaucracies, some groups (e.g., the American Farm Bureau Federation) can be

well organized and demanding. Rural district leaders can also come under the influence of a few individuals who think of themselves as owners of the community. While city superintendents can call upon a variety of resources, from the community to colleges and universities and foundations, rural district leaders are often on their own.

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To be successful, the superintendent of a small, rural school district must possess high-end political skills.<sup>4</sup>

Superintendents must earn the respect of staff and citizenry, identify which issues and initiatives to address and those

whose time has not yet come, build coalitions in support of necessary actions, co-opt or neutralize opponents, and manage at the micro level of day-to-day activities while at the same time contemplating and attending to matters at the macro level of long-term strategic importance. What's more, the superintendent must do these things with scant resources: often little or no staff support, and no ability to hire consultants or give money to supportive community groups. All this must be done in a fishbowl environment where virtually every action or inaction, whether in professional or personal life, is on display.

Of course, urban systems face problems that rural districts do not. Our point is not to underplay the seriousness of problems facing urban education leaders. But rural leaders face distinctive problems that haven't received enough attention. Our goal in this paper is to shed some light in a general way on the forces that shape the politics of Idaho's small, rural school districts—and almost certainly of similar districts in other states.

The paper has two main parts. The first regards the situation rural K-12 leaders face, defined in terms of the assets they have, the challenges they face, and the constraints that limit what they can do. The second is an analysis of leadership and the exercise of political skill by rural superintendents.



## • ASSETS, CHALLENGES, AND CONSTRAINTS •

One superintendent remarked that Idaho's schools receive state funding at a level that is about 50 percent of the national average. (Authors' note: Idaho's per-pupil education funding is much higher than 50 percent of the national median, \$2,000/pupil lower). What's more, a state official observed that when Idaho's school funding base was changed several years ago from property taxes to the state sales tax, monies flowing to the schools began to decline. Each superintendent interviewed for this project lamented this drop in state funding in recent years.

School districts with large federal forest lands also have experienced a reduction of payments-in-lieu-of-taxes. This is despite valiant efforts of Idaho's congressional delegation to preserve such funds.

Viewed from the state capitol in Boise, the school funding formula is weighted to provide an enhanced share of money for small, rural districts. Problem is, even with the weighted formula rural districts struggle to underwrite a basic education, maintain or replace old used-up buildings, and acquire the state-of-the-art equipment necessary for science labs, enrichment courses, counseling, and services for special needs children. Moreover, a real question persists as to whether Idaho's economy will grow to the point where it produces more money.

Funding problems translate directly into the classroom. One superintendent we interviewed faced a 25 percent cut in state funding, caused by declines in state and federal dollars. He and the board succeeded in winning passage of a special levy to keep the schools open. Still, he was forced to adopt a four-day school week. The financial benefits of the four-day week

came largely in salary savings, as support staff such as cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and maintenance people are now paid for only four days. Some additional savings may accrue if buildings are not used on the fifth day, due to reductions in spending for lights, heat, and water.

Not everything about this change is necessarily harmful to students. In the district with the four-day week, teachers agreed to add about an hour to the school day, boosting total classroom instruction time. The district also added 17 professional development days for teachers. And a portion of those “PDs” included enrichment days when students came in on Fridays for special programs not otherwise in the curriculum.

The superintendent who was pleased with his system’s four-day week reported that student performance in his schools had improved from the 39th percentile to the mid-60th percentile, and that both faculty and students like the new schedule.

The “loss of funding is bleeding us,” declared another superintendent whose budget is “down 20 percent.” This leader also serves as principal for the K-8 school and teaches a remedial reading course. She is typical of rural school superintendents who every day “wear many hats.”

## HUMAN RESOURCES

“I have a hard time finding technical and financial expertise in this area,” said the superintendent in a tiny crossroads town. He specifically mentioned his need for some financial expertise, some specialists to help with long-term planning, and, perhaps, volunteers

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to teach high-level courses in science and technology. “It is hard to get people to move out to these places,” added a state official. “There’s a lack of cultural offerings, shopping, the kinds of things people want in their lives.”

Talent is a scarce resource. Rural districts closer to Boise may initially get well-trained, top-level staff. They typically cannot hold onto them, as they leave for larger school districts with more resources and better facilities. For the more isolated rurals, it is common that the district superintendent is the only “expert,” and support staff are not trained for their jobs but instead represent the best available in the locality at the time.

Rural districts put tremendous strain on superintendents. In later sections we will discuss the unique burdens of their roles as senior political figures in their communities. Here we emphasize simply the number of things they must do, from driving buses, teaching, and serving as the chief compliance officer and paperwork wrangler for all federal and state programs. As one superintendent said, “I’m it! I don’t have any support staff like the guys running the large districts. They can delegate the work to staff. But I have to turn in the same reports as they do. It takes a lot of time.”

This is a common theme among small-district leaders. In political terms, they need help

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to become much more user-friendly.”**

in reducing this burden, a key factor in superintendent burnout.<sup>5</sup> Declared one weary superintendent, “The state education department needs to become much more user-friendly.”

## ISOLATION: SIZE AND DISTANCE MATTER

Whether leaders adopt innovative changes or personally take on a backbreaking workload, superintendents in remote areas are on their own. There are no universities or major corporations in their territories from which to draw special help. There is not a variety of civic organizations to provide volunteer-enrichment programs. They do not have access to local foundations for special resources. Most urban superintendents can turn to at least some outside institutions for support, and rely on well-staffed central offices to apply for competitive grants. These things are not possible in remote Idaho districts—and probably not in the majority of America’s rural communities.

Geographic remoteness cannot entirely be overcome by the Internet, Skype, or videoconferencing. District leaders, in part because they are so loaded up with work, acknowledge very little contact with colleagues in other localities and from the state. Those near Boise have more opportunities for collaboration, but in more remote areas this is extremely difficult. Further, unlike urban superintendents who are expected to take part in regional and national events, rural leaders are expected to stay at home. Those who do travel can be charged with extravagance and indulging in “boondoggles.”

Isolated communities also are small. Aside from farms, many isolated communities have only three to five businesses and only one church, if any. This does not allow a large pool of people with business or nonprofit experience to serve on the school board or provide advice and support to the superintendent.

Isolated rural educators simply do not have the same opportunities to develop the professional connections and contacts that translate into influence with the state department of education or the legislature. One superintendent said the fact that he had worked in state government prior to becoming head of a small, rural school district meant he knew at least some people at the state capitol in Boise. He understood the workings of state government and could, when needed, pick up the phone and talk with someone he knew. He added that others without his unique background likely could not do the same.

Idaho's rural superintendents are probably more "on their own" than those in other states. Idaho has no regional service centers that can provide managerial help, services to special-needs students, or in-service training for teachers. The neighboring state of Washington has addressed this problem through its regional Education Service Districts (ESD). These entities provide technical assistance ranging from compliance matters involving state and federal law to counseling in matters of finance and new initiatives, as well as help locating specialist consultants.

In Idaho, superintendents must find their own sources of technical help. Some superintendents in isolated but not extremely remote districts have formed alliances with their peers in other small districts. This provides collegial support and often leads to sharing of staff resources—in one case, the only qualified chemistry teacher in a rural county with four isolated districts. However, face-to-face meetings require a great deal of driving and coordination, and consume a great deal of time.

**Isolation isn't just physical; it is political and psychological.**

Isolation isn't just physical; it is political and psychological. Unlike urban districts, whose performance and fiscal soundness can draw the attention of the governor and key legislators, small rural districts can be orphans. A superintendent in a

remote place with few inhabitants has no particular allies in the state capitol. Even their state representatives know that votes are few in the remotest areas, and costs of time and travel are high.

Several of the leaders we spoke with said they rarely see their state legislators in their towns. One superintendent succeeded in organizing a meeting with a few of his neighboring counterparts and (at the time we spoke with him) hoped that one state representative would show up. While other states have rural education associations that can speak up for remote districts and tell local leaders when they need to get engaged, Idaho has no such organization.

## AGING FACILITIES

Idaho's small, rural school districts not only provide educational services, they also serve as the locus for community activities. As mainline churches have consolidated parishes and pulled clergy back into larger towns and cities, school auditoriums, often the largest and best spaces in town, host such special events as town meetings, memorial services, even retirement parties. Gyms can host plays, bazaars, and other community events during the months of inclement weather. Consequently, communities hold a stake in their school facilities beyond graduations and basketball and volleyball games.

And yet, in some rural districts these facilities have aged and deteriorated, becoming millstones around the district's fiscal neck. They can sap resources and open up difficult issues about whether to close a facility that has served an important community purpose. Facilities problems can also make it difficult for a community to find a good superintendent. As one said, "Think about that. With an attitude like that in a community [where people won't pass a building levy], how do you get a good superintendent to go there?"

## AN EMERGENT ISSUE

### • Sidebar •

Recent fatal gunplay in other American schools has added a new priority concern for Idaho's educators: school safety. Idaho is a gun-friendly state where hunting, self-protection, collecting, and target shooting are part and parcel of the culture. Yet ever since the horrible murders at schools in Littleton, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut, school safety has been on the front burner for educators from preschool on up to the college and university level. Not long ago, the chairman of one Idaho school district board surprised his colleagues by introducing a proposal to arm their teachers with guns. The reaction was swift. The strong backlash of opposition came from other board members, the district's administrators, teachers, and a large and vocal citizenry. His guns-for-the-teachers proposal was quickly shot down. The episode nevertheless raises the specter of school safety. This is another aspect of education that makes for good politics.

Both the superintendent of public instruction and the governor have mounted a new school safety initiative. A group of stakeholders plus a former State of Idaho police director will assess "safety and security across Idaho" in order to make "recommendations for improvements." The superintendents we interviewed welcome this initiative even though all expressed confidence in the safety of their communities and their schools.

## POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP

Rural Idaho honors the Jefferson-inspired agrarian tradition: being close to the land, hard work, rugged individualism and self-reliance, but also a readiness to help one's neighbor. These are good and important values that are alive today in rural America.

That said, Idaho's rural districts function in a culture of resistance to outside influences. Some of this opposition arises from political ideology. Some may also come from the influence of conservative churches that play an active role in a given community. Mormon and evangelical congregations provide conservative influences, typically opposing sex-education courses and in general hewing to a conservative sociopolitical line.

Nevertheless, most superintendents said the churches in their communities were active supporters of the schools, shared facilities with the schools, and in a few instances provided support for the passage of special levies. A couple of the superintendents told us that in their districts, where there are Mormon seminaries—one period a day for their students to attend in separate buildings—those congregations offer good support to the public schools.

**Given the conservative opposition to the Common Core Standards, we were surprised *not* to hear this as an issue for superintendents.**

Given the conservative opposition to the Common Core Standards, we were surprised *not* to hear this as an issue for superintendents. At the time of our interviews, no opposition was evident, despite the fact that several county newspapers had covered plans to train

teachers for the Common Core and administer the first Core-aligned tests.

One partisan note was struck as educators discussed the role of the American Farm Bureau Federation. Some Farm Bureau chapters in Idaho present stiff opposition to underfunded rural schools if they mount drives to pass a special levy. According to one state official close to the politics of rural education, "The issue with levies is the tax base, property. Some farmers own thousands of acres. Approval of a levy raises their costs." She added, "That affects their bottom lines. And some farmers are not doing all that well now."

Another conservative group opposing special school district levies is the Tea Party, one constituent part of the Republican Party. "In my district," explained the superintendent, "a Tea Party group holds a meeting before our school board meets and frames how they will participate in the board's sessions."

Others noted that teachers unions had also become more militant, even in small communities. They attributed this in part to a reaction against perceived anti-union initiatives on the Idaho ballot in 2012, and to reaction against Tea Party activism. Polarization adds to the challenges of rural district leadership. One superintendent said the only way to deal with militants was to be forthright and unbiased: “[T]hey usually don’t have their facts straight, and so we spend time explaining precisely what we are doing and why.”

## SCHOOL BOARDS

Small remote communities have school boards, just like urban districts. However, there are big differences. In very small communities, school board membership is a burdensome service, not a step toward higher office. Also, the pool of people who can run for the school board is much narrower than in an urban area. There are few people in government jobs

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where release time can be easy to arrange, and few adults whose families can do without their earnings. Some superintendents noted that in their communities many small-business owners are reluctant to run for the school board, preferring not to take sides on issues out of fear that the decisions they might make would offend some of their customers.

Typically, superintendents—with the help of their existing board members—must work to recruit people to run. The pool of talent is small indeed. It is common that rural school board members are new to board service and don’t know how to be effective. In large cities and suburban districts, the pool of potential board members likely includes people with business experience, or a background of community activism, or membership on another board of directors, so that at least some come prepared to step into the job. The Idaho School Boards Association (ISBA) has a program to help address this problem for small, rural school districts, which we discuss later on.

## THE SUPERINTENDENT AS POLITICAL LEADER

One superintendent, whose district lost two levy elections when the Farm Bureau backed the opponents, said the supporters went to the drawing board to study what had led to the losses. “An analysis showed that we had not done a good job turning out our supporters,” he said. “We formed a new committee, carefully studied where we needed to get to the areas where we thought our supporters were, then mounted an intensive campaign to reach them and get them to the polls.” It worked and the levy passed, narrowly.

**[One district] leader managed to achieve the spending cuts by closing a building, eliminating heat in the auditorium, and paring back the athletic schedule and teacher pay.**

What turned the tide in this instance was the exercise of old-fashioned politics. First, the superintendent and the board members identified the precincts where they believed their potential supporters to live. They developed a communications plan involving letters to individuals, mobilized the teachers, their families, and their relatives, won

support from the local newspaper, and even knocked on doors. Hard work, but it paid off.

In this case, the levy campaign caused an open split between a father and son. An active member of the Farm Bureau, the dad campaigned against the levy. His son, himself a dad with children in the schools, worked to pass it. Such a divide is not uncommon in families in American politics. However, in a small, rural community, such family breaches quickly become fodder for gossip and raised eyebrows.

A final levy story further exemplifies the political calculations superintendents need to make. “We had a tough time passing our levy,” said a beleaguered superintendent. “First off, we compete with a hospital district for voter support, as they have a levy, too. We developed an open process, people participated, and it was agreed to put a \$150,000 levy on the ballot—but we were required to identify \$150,000 in reduced spending as a condition.”

This leader managed to achieve the spending cuts by closing a building, eliminating heat in the auditorium, and paring back the athletic schedule and teacher pay. He added that his budget now has no contingency fund and only a small reserve. “We are one step away from a disaster,” he said.

The political take from this story is that had both sides been unwilling to compromise, there would have been no levy and no new money. The district that was starved for cash came to the table in need. The opponents, or at least those resistant to new taxes, demanded



budget cuts. This was a classic quid pro quo: you “cut the fat” and “we’ll support the levy.” This required painful cuts in support staff and extracurricular programs. But to this superintendent, the alternative—a stalemate with the community—would have been worse.

The superintendent added that, during levy fights, he and the board members are careful to stick to facts, be transparent in their dealings, and be open to any citizen who wants to participate and get information about the schools. “We’re a small community,” he said. “There are no secrets.”

Superintendents also have to mount political campaigns to move the people who nominally work for them. A state official in Boise, a veteran of Idaho’s education scene and politics, discussed the resistance to change in small, rural school districts. “Research shows that, among the major professions and occupations in America, people who go into teaching, into education, are among the most risk-averse people in the workforce. This renders teachers and many administrators resistant to change—not good for improving education.”

The superintendents we spoke with did not come from this risk-averse frame of mind, but they discussed openly how difficult it is to make changes and to institute reforms. In addition to teachers and other education staff being risk averse and resistant to change, their communities stood fast as barriers to it. This is every bit as much a political problem as it is a matter of education policy and practice. We’ll discuss this topic more in a later section.

## LEADERSHIP IN A FISHBOWL

It will come as no surprise that in small towns, everyone either knows everyone or, at a minimum, knows about everyone. This familiarity is a political fact of life, either on purpose or by default. As one superintendent declared, “Everything is on the table. You can’t hide anything in a small community.” Everyone knows how much the superintendent makes, and he or she is often the highest-paid individual in the community. This can come with scrutiny of consumption decisions: If the superintendent buys a new car, it can become the subject of gossip. Being the highest paid, or at least being perceived as such, brings constant

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expectations to make donations for civic events, charities, and celebrations. A smart superintendent understands the need to be consistent—for example, if you donate to one group, be sure to balance that with a donation to others.

Familiarity is in part a natural defense mechanism for small communities. Because neighbors are few and institutions are weak or nonexistent, people need and depend on one another. Rural and small-town folk live and work together in a kind of proximity not found in large cities and suburbs. They are members of the volunteer fire department; attend the same schools and churches; loan a tractor when a neighbor's is in the shop; hunt and fish together; attend the high school football games; fix dinner when illness visits a friend or neighbor; marry and bury one another.

In the political context, however, this familiarity imposes some rules peculiar to small, rural school districts. One is the rule of transparency. The superintendents we spoke with emphasized the impossibility of hiding facts about what the schools are doing and how they are being managed.

**In an urban school district, a simple job action such as laying off a nontenured teacher who might be ineffective probably will not affect the whole community. That same action in a place with a tiny population could have a major impact.**

Another rule is connectedness. In an urban school district, a simple job action such as laying off a nontenured teacher who might be ineffective probably will not affect the whole community. That same action in a place with a tiny population could have a major impact. "Look," said one superintendent, "if I have to lay off some staff, one of my teachers may

be the sole breadwinner for a small farm that is not making enough money to continue. If I lay her off, she not only loses her job, the family might lose their farm and others might lose *their* jobs. I consider such things when making these very hard decisions."

Personnel actions, even lukewarm performance reviews, are especially risky in small towns. One superintendent: "Long-term employees or community members feel like they deserve special treatment because they perceive they have given a lot to the school system. This makes any discipline issue harder." A person's history in the town can even become relevant in small matters, e.g., disputes over who gets to rent the gym.

Pillow talk can matter. As often happens in rural areas, educators are married to one another. Naturally, they will compare notes when the superintendent and/or the school board face some tough decisions. Much of what goes on in small towns revolves around the schools. People will talk about it. Smart managers get the facts out so that when people talk, hopefully they use accurate information.

**Superintendents who are “not from here” need to learn quickly about rivalries, alliances, and family ties.**

Superintendents who are “not from here” need to learn quickly about rivalries, alliances, and family ties. Rural places can be both accepting and reserved toward education leaders who come in as outsiders.

The community that put on a baby shower for the new school superintendent from out of state, who was “not one of them,” demonstrates this caring for one another, even if that “one” is as yet an outsider. But leaders can’t presume automatic acceptance and good will. A dispute with a teacher or parent can lead to reactions that blindside an inexperienced leader. Rural superintendents also make decisions about student or staff discipline that, in big urban districts, specialized bureaucracies handle. These actions can affect relationships with prominent families and have lasting implications.

But disciplinary decisions must be made; ducking them can weaken the character and coherence of school environments. Superintendents who grew up in rural areas know this. They try to develop good relationships quickly. “I go to funerals,” said one. “That’s the fastest way I can learn who is related to and friends with whom.”

Rural superintendents also initiate contact with their board members, both on execution of agreed-upon plans and on handling of crises (e.g., incidents at school, a bus accident). One superintendent told us about getting on the phone to update each board member about an incident before they learn about it from the grapevine (which carries news very quickly).

One superintendent puts great stock in his weekly staff meetings. All members of his management team are present, whether they are academic leaders, maintenance supervisors, nutrition staff, or coaches. “I want all these leaders to hear the same information at the same time in the same way and be able to ask questions or make comments,” he said. “This helps them be a part of the decisions and has resulted in good camaraderie.” It also means that when his managers talk schools with family and friends, or curious citizens, they all can speak from the same information base.

Small-town newspapers typically come out weekly and usually provide lots of news about the schools. Leaders and educators in these communities, therefore, are wise (and politically smart) to be on good terms with the local publisher who, wearing a journalist’s hat, expects to receive good and regular information on the *public, taxpayer-supported* schools. The superintendents we interviewed for this project all understood this. They indicated that their local newspapers generally were very supportive of the schools. Some publishers even helped promote levy campaigns.

Savvy superintendents and school board leaders do not need to broadcast every last detail or every option they consider when faced with big or especially tough decisions. If they have earned the trust of their communities, starting with their staff, parents, and community leaders, they will be cut some slack when the hard choices come along. Those who try to play “hide the ball” in small, close-knit towns will lose that trust—or will never gain it.

**“I like to go to all the kids’ games,” said one smart superintendent. “I want to support our kids and the coaches. But really, most of my time in the stands is taking questions and talking with parents, grandparents, and the alums and the school’s supporters. They want to get to know me, ask questions, or just let me have it when they have a gripe. That’s OK. It’s part of my job.”**

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gripe. That’s OK. It’s part of my job.” Superintendents also find themselves under pressure to attend meetings of local civic organizations and church events. The aggregate of all these demands means that the superintendent, unlike his or her neighbors, cannot live a slow-paced rural life.

Another superintendent: “People hit me up at the grocery store, the only gas station we have in town, or if they see me outside my house they may stop to talk.” He said because he “grew up in Idaho, on a farm,” people will even ask his views on a farming matter.

In political parlance, this is known as “working the room.” Shrewd superintendents stay close to their communities. It helps them stay abreast of what people are saying and doing. It builds trust when the superintendent or school board member takes a genuine interest in people. It pays off if and when a special levy goes on the ballot, or some other big decision must be settled.

## PRACTICAL POLITICS

Idaho's rural school districts require good political leadership because so many live and work on the edge. Superintendents and board members must work together if they are to deliver good education under trying and confining circumstances. This requires an abundance of political smarts, political responsibility, and political foresight.

**In large school systems, there is more room for political error, more opportunity to cover up missteps and bad judgments, in part because of the anonymity afforded by their sheer size. In a small, rural district, everything is clearer, more personal, and more immediate.**

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everything is clearer, more personal, and more immediate.

It is nigh impossible to overstate the importance of the critical role superintendents play in small, rural school districts, how central they are to the success of their community's schools and the education of its children. So much in these resource-poor institutions depends upon the person who captains them.

Effective leadership for the small, rural district superintendent requires a mix of talents, instinct, and good judgment. It is not enough to be intelligent, well-educated, and knowledgeable about matters academic and educational. It is not enough to possess good people skills. It is not enough simply to work hard. The effective superintendent in these communities must be all of these and more—in a word (and in its best sense), a leader of superb *political skill*.

She or he must be a strategic thinker, able to see and pursue big-picture goals while at the same time working at the minute level of detail of the daily routine. She or he must not just stay in contact with staff, parents, and community leaders but *be in touch* with them. Be a good listener and, in turn, a good communicator. Be humble and self-aware enough to know what she or he *does not know*, and be willing to seek and accept help to compensate. Develop at least two or three close and confidential relationships so that, in time of difficulty, she or he can have a full and confidential offline conversation, listen to and consider advice, and make a decision—confident in the knowledge that

**“Lone ranger” types are not well suited for the role of small district superintendent.**

key players will support the call. “Lone ranger” types are not well suited for the role of small district superintendent.

Moreover, the small, rural school district superintendent must be personable. That intangible of likeability—call it a “friendly personality”—will go far with students, staff, and stubborn citizens as she or he works to lead within the confines and constraints of limited resources, a risk-averse staff, inadequate facilities, and a conservative, fishbowl environment. She or he must attempt to coach a team to success on a limited playing field, by analogy no larger than a basketball court. To superintendents’ credit, this can and is being done.

The superintendents of large districts do not need to possess all the skills and instincts just described. They can hire staff to fill in for their shortcomings. Small district superintendents do not enjoy that luxury.

Already we have seen the types of challenges superintendents must overcome. In one rural area, where the superintendent lost 25 percent of state revenue allotted to his district, he and his board decided to sponsor a special levy. “I met with our teachers and their union representatives. I told them the bare facts, that if the levy failed we’d have to cut pay,” he said. “If it passed we could provide a small increase. They knew I was playing it straight. The levy passed, just barely.”

Another superintendent deals regularly with a farmer who is a strong supporter of the schools in his district. But when a special levy went on the ballot, “He told me he would not vote for it. He said he liked what we are doing. But he could not afford a tax increase.” This superintendent enjoys trust in his community because he keeps his lines of communication open, even with those who oppose his initiatives—very sound politics.

The new superintendent from another state, well aware that he is regarded as “not yet one of the community,” nevertheless works steadily, meeting with people, going to the senior center, making the rounds of the few businesses in his town, visiting farmers and attending some of their meetings, making sure he is at every high school sporting event. “To win their trust, people have got to get to know me,” he said. “That means I must go to them—they appreciate that.”

These examples reflect pragmatic, effective (political) strategy: candor regarding a special levy and wages; open lines of communication even with opponents; and the patience and willingness to reach out to meet and greet the people in the community on their terms, their turf.

## **BRINGING—AND ADAPTING TO—CHANGE**

Interestingly, the superintendents we interviewed indicated there was either acceptance or very little opposition to establishing the national Common Core learning standards in their communities. On the other hand, in several districts reforms that would take advantage of technology have met with resistance.

Idaho has wired all high schools to the Internet. This major investment allows schools and teachers to participate in distance learning, to access special expertise, and to enrich a variety of courses and programs. But some teachers and communities balk at fully employing this tool.

One superintendent who wanted to save some money by consolidating the small chemistry class in each of two high schools found opposition. The idea was that instead of two chemistry teachers, one for a class of 12 students and another for a class of 13, one teacher could take one class in person while connecting with the other class via the Internet. The teacher would alternate, one day in one school, the next day in the other school. This would open up a teaching slot for another class offering. The plan was rejected, as each school wanted its own chemistry teacher—a manifestation of the risk-averse, change-resistant nature of educators.

Idaho's small, rural districts have been very slow to use distance learning labs, reports one state education official. "These labs are very effective," he said. "They offer AP (Advanced Placement) courses that many small schools on their own cannot afford. They are great for teaching foreign languages."

The highway for such academic enrichment is the Idaho Education Network (IEN). According to its website,

*The IEN is a private, high-speed broadband network connecting K-12 high schools across the state. The network is managed to provide schools with technical support and resources without impacting their budgets. As schools adopt technology, the IEN provides adequate bandwidth to meet those educational needs.*

*The IEN also equips schools with videoconferencing equipment. This tool is an option for schools to use to connect students to courses and other virtual content. Videoconferencing has been successful in rural areas and with budget-conscious schools.*

So far, the superintendents we met make heavy use of the Internet for in-school and community-wide communications: Facebook, websites, and e-newsletters are regular and effective ways to reach faculty, students, and the community at large. But broader use of Internet tools for academic purposes has been slow to come.

As might be expected, superintendents told us that veteran teachers tend to be less familiar, and therefore less comfortable, with employing technology in their classes. Younger teachers who are more familiar with high-tech are eager to use it. The lack of resources combined with adherence to the new Common Core standards, plus the infusion of younger teachers replacing those who retire, will inevitably bring much more use of Internet educational tools and course materials into Idaho's small, rural schools.

On another front, one superintendent whose district is near a community college and another private college has forged cooperative agreements that allow some of his students to take classes there as part of a new certification course to become nursing assistants. Also in the works is a welding certification program. "A lot of jobs in this area are in the fields," he said. "Not all of our graduates will go on to college, and we need people to work in the fields and shops that support agriculture," he said.

**Folding technology resources into school curricula offers an important advantage to resource-poor rural school districts.**

Folding technology resources into school curricula offers an important advantage to resource-poor rural school districts. This plays off the fact that, as one superintendent told us, "The schools are at the center of our communities' identity. People take great pride in their local school."



To keep the schools open and part of the community, instead of consolidating those that are close and could benefit from a merger, the Internet offers a low- or no-cost means to upgrade classes, expand course offerings, and give students access to master teachers. It appears to be a much easier sell (politically) than consolidating programs and/or merging schools. And it appears that the deployment of technology is inevitable. Small, rural school districts, however worthy, are not likely to gain massive infusions of money to pay for the academic and facility enrichments they need and deserve. The Internet presents a host of effective and economical opportunities to help them close the resource gap they now suffer due to their remoteness and poor economic status.

A governor's task force that examined Idaho's schools yielded a report with a set of 20 recommendations, including investing more money in the K-12 schools. The governor followed through and submitted a set of recommendations to the legislature that would increase funding and produce additional enhancements and reforms. If passed, Idaho's small, rural districts will benefit. Boosting public schools is good politics.

Meanwhile, there are other available resources that can benefit rural schools. The state's school board association, ISBA, conducts workshops and seminars focused on recruitment and training, how to develop strategic plans, how to organize and manage finances, and how to evaluate senior district staff. Because it can be difficult to attract well-qualified superintendent candidates to move to a small, remote community, ISBA helps school boards assess their own community and its needs, and then seek out candidates who might be a good fit.<sup>6</sup>

## • IMPLICATIONS •

This initial, brief exploration into the realm of Idaho's small, rural school districts suggests some opportunities for changes to improve their lot.

Increased funding is an obvious part of the answer. The "but," of course, is that the state of Idaho is not overflowing with revenues to share. Nor is its political culture well disposed toward tax increases. Still, the governor has proposed some new resources so that funding is now formally part of the conversation and on the official agenda.

One possibility for additional resources is to provide financial incentives to the small, rural districts for sharing facilities, investing in technology, and building distance learning courses into their regular curricula. Another could be the elimination of mandates on class sizes, and employment rules that could liberate dollars now spent to satisfy regulations. New rules that would make it easier for districts to share staff and employ non-certified teachers part-time (scientists, musicians) could add quality without much additional cost.

**A major improvement that would require a relatively small investment would be to relieve the paperwork burden that is sapping the time and energy of rural superintendents, who have no support staff.**

A major improvement that would require a relatively small investment would be to relieve the paperwork burden that is sapping the time and energy of rural superintendents, who have no support staff. First, eliminate reporting requirements that do not substantially contribute to the enlightenment or accountability of their operations. Second, establish some lean

regional education services districts to handle the reporting and management burdens of the small districts, and also to help them combine to extend their existing resources by providing no-cost technical and financial expertise.

The state also could provide incentive funding for enriched professional development for superintendents and teachers, and perhaps even year-long, fully-paid sabbaticals for superintendents (as well as for those teachers in hard-to-fill subject disciplines) in return for commitments to stay on the job in their district for an extended period of time.

**Idaho's legislators should increase their presence and familiarity with the trials, tribulations, and the potential of the state's small, rural school districts.**

Finally, it must be said that Idaho's legislators should increase their presence and familiarity with the trials, tribulations, and the potential of the state's small, rural school districts. Their infrequent visits, not to say the absence of these elected

leaders, is a deficit that demands correcting. Rural educators, including board members in Idaho's remote communities, may not be miracle workers—but they sometimes come close. With some fresh, concentrated attention, many of the problems confronting these communities could be overcome, or at least ameliorated.

Remoteness, scarce resources, and change-resistant communities act in combination to limit the options available to leaders of small, rural districts. Superintendents in particular are the quarterbacks of school programs and district operations. It is no stretch to say that most days they perform in an environment so confined, it's like trying to play football on a basketball court.

## • WHAT WE STILL DON'T KNOW •

This paper, and the little study that informed it, was intended to open up questions and lead to something more ambitious. A larger study could do three things:

1. More fully represent the commonalities and differences among types of rural districts, by number of students served, geographic size, and remoteness from urban areas. It is possible, for example, that we have generalized too much about local politics and the roles of superintendents. A larger and more representative study is likely to reveal differences among types of districts that we were unable to detect.
2. Assess the effects of state policy and context differences. Though we did some interviews in neighboring states, they were too few in number to support any judgments about how rural leadership and politics differ in terms of population (are rural districts serving mainly African American or Latino students different from mainly white Idaho?), levels of state funding, and accessibility of colleges, universities, and regional service centers.
3. Look more deeply, and for a longer time, into the political and administrative dynamics of rural places by interviewing a wider range of individuals, both outside and within the district. Our results are essentially a snapshot taken in late 2013, limited to whatever people and issues we could round up in a single visit to a locality. Deeper analysis might tell us more about the demands and limitations of superintendent leadership. It should also support analysis of some failure cases, in which superintendents failed or districts split up due to weak leadership or irreconcilable internal divisions.

We hope to mount such a study in the future. It could lead to much more explicit prescriptions on everything from state funding and regulatory policy to superintendent training and selection.

## • APPENDIX: RURAL SCHOOLS QUESTIONS •

1. Tell us about yourself, previous jobs.
  - a. Are you a local person or have you recently moved into the community?
  - b. Is your insider/outsider status an asset or a handicap?
2. In this locality what is the most important problem facing K-12 schools?
3. What goals/measures are you pursuing?
4. What are the biggest barriers you face in getting these or other things done?
  - a. Resources
  - b. Talent
  - c. Getting agreement among key players
  - d. State or federal regulations

*[Ask about each but we will then focus on local players]*

5. Who are the key players who can either help with or impede actions you think are needed?
  - a. Insiders—teachers, principals, central office
  - b. School board
  - c. Other community powers: elected officials, business, religious, partisan
6. When you need to get something done, whom can you count on for support/help?
7. Do some of these groups have agendas that are at odds with yours?

8. Are there broader issues in the community that are not about schools but affect education?  
What are the issues and who is on what side?
9. Are some actions kept off the table because of staunch opposition?  
What actions, whose opposition?
10. Are there some groups with stakes in the schools who just can't assert themselves?
11. What doesn't get done as a result?
  - a. In particular migrants: Who advocates for them? Is there a source of resistance to things they/their teachers need?
12. We don't want to stir things up but...is there someone who would have a different angle on these issues that we should talk with?

## • ENDNOTES •

- 1 We knew about and had led some studies of politics and leadership in big cities, but assumed those studies would be more useful sources of contrast rather than patterns to follow. See, for example, Glass, T., L. Bjork, and C. Brunner. 2000. *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency: a look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators; Fuller, Howard. 2003. *An Impossible Job? The View from the Superintendent's Chair*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education. For broader studies of urban governance, see Epstein, Noel. 2004. *Who's in Charge Here: The Tangled Web of School Governance and Policy*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. See also: Brewer, Dominic and Joanna Smith. 2006. *Evaluating the "Crazy Quilt": Educational Governance in California*. Stanford: Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice.
- 2 There are also some revealing case studies of superintendent leadership in individual rural communities. See, for example, Jacobson, S.L. "Effective Superintendents of Small, Rural Districts." *Journal of Rural and Small Schools* 2 (1988): 17-21.; Herzog, M.J. and R. Pittman. "The Nature of Rural Schools: Trends, Perceptions, and Values." In *Leadership for Rural Schools: Lessons for All*, edited by D.M. Chalker, 11-24. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co, 1999.; Tagg, G.J. "The Trials and Tribulations of a Rural Superintendent." Paper presented at the annual convention for the American Association of School Administrators, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1982.
- 3 See Farmer, T.A. "Unique Rural District Policies." *The Rural Educator* 30 (2009): 29-33. See also Budge, K. "Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem Privilege, and Possibility." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 21 (2009): 29-33.
- 4 For a less political but complementary analysis of the rural superintendent's role, see Forner, M., L. Bierlein-Palmer, and P. Reeves. "Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano's Leadership Correlates." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 27 (2012): 1-13.
- 5 On issues of turnover and superintendent pipeline development, see Jacobson, S.L. "Effective Superintendents of Small, Rural Districts." *Journal of Rural and Small Schools* 2 (1988): 17-21.; Herzog, M.J. and R. Pittman. "The Nature of Rural Schools: Trends, Perceptions, and Values." In *Leadership for Rural Schools: Lessons for All*, edited by D.M. Chalker, 11-24. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co, 1999.; Tagg, G.J. "The Trials and Tribulations of a Rural Superintendent." Paper presented at the annual convention for the American Association of School Administrators, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1982.
- 6 On issues of succession and pipeline development, see Jacobson, S.L. "The Rural Superintendency: Reconsidering the Administrative Farm System." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 5 (1988): 37-42.

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