

## RURAL K-12 EDUCATION: A PANDEMIC TO PROSPERITY WHITE PAPER

*Prepared for Rural Development Taskforce, a Resilient Louisiana Task Force*

*May 26, 2020 (Wilma Hamilton-Delp, Marjorie Taylor, Ashley Stewart, Akeshia Singleton)*

### NEED

Without a good education, prospects for a good job with good earnings are slim. A good education starts with a good foundation. Students who are reading proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to graduate from high school with a diploma than those who are not proficient readers<sup>i</sup> and a high school graduate makes \$6,000 more a year than someone without a high school degree<sup>ii</sup>.

Rural school systems in Louisiana currently comprise 50% of the 69 school districts and serve 18% of Louisiana students<sup>iii</sup>. Rural school districts are also typically the largest single employer in the community and serve as the foundation for community development. Rural school districts face unique challenges including:

- **Lack of financial resources.** Sixty-one percent of rural school districts are facing a financial crisis due to shrinking school populations, high transportation costs and minimal opportunities for increasing local tax revenues<sup>ii</sup>. Also, most national funding opportunities typically target urban communities. This leads to a lack of best practice, evidence-based, research on rural communities.
- **Lack of local resources to implement evidence-based best practices.** For example, work-based learning best practices include internships, mentorships and apprenticeships. However rural communities often lack the diversity of local industry partners that are available in urban areas. If work-based programs are implemented they are limited to one or two professions. This may end up pigeonholing students into professions that are not a good fit. The problem is further exacerbated as populations shrink and major employers leave the communities. This also leads to an overall lack of awareness of the vast types of professions possible.
- **Recruiting and retaining qualified talent to work in the schools.** In less affluent rural communities, 21% of classes are taught by uncertified or out-of-field teachers compared to only 13% in urban or suburban communities<sup>iv</sup>. Compounding issues include lower salaries, having to teach multiple subjects and grade levels, and not wanting to relocate to a rural community. The loss of one teacher with a particular certification has a huge impact on staffing and course offerings because some rural schools may have one certified teacher per subject per grade level.
- **Limited opportunities for advanced programming and career and technical education programs.** Low student enrollment and a lack of certified teachers also affects the delivery and content options for students in rural schools. Therefore, many rural students have limited options for college preparation courses and career and technical education courses. Virtual course delivery is expanding opportunities but there are challenges and limitations. Challenges include access to technology and lack of professional development in virtual platforms and online delivery. Furthermore, virtual course delivery is not always appropriate for career and technical education programs that require hands-on learning such as welding, manufacturing and healthcare related labs.
- **Inadequate connectivity.** The Digital Divide (those who have access to telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not) became glaringly apparent when distance learning

was required by the school closures caused by COVID-19. This access problem was most evident in rural settings with limited connectivity infrastructures.

## OPPORTUNITY

### 1. NEW POSSIBILITIES

Response to COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption and use of virtual learning service delivery models by all districts. There is an opportunity to build on the momentum and connectivity infrastructure that is being built by helping districts fully utilize virtual learning options to provide course offerings that rural districts are unable to afford because enrollment might be too low or where certified staff are in short supply.

Also, if districts have the capacity to switch back and forth between remote learning and face-to-face learning they can continue to provide instruction during bad weather or building issues which would decrease the number of make-up days and loss of instructional time. Remote learning options can also be used for students who must remain home for health issues.

### 2. FUNDING TO ADDRESS CONNECTIVITY

There are currently several funds available at the federal level and Louisiana should be sure they are accessing all of these available resources. These include opportunities already provided through the following programs:

The Universal Service Fund This program was designed so that all Americans would have access to communication services at reasonable rates. It encompasses four areas.

1. The High Cost Connect America Fund specifically provides support for rural areas.
2. The Low-Income (Lifeline) Program exists to help low SES families gain access to telecommunications.
3. The Schools and Libraries (E-rate) Program provides discounts to libraries and school districts building their telecommunications infrastructures.
4. The Rural Health Care Program provides support to eligible rural health care providers for telecommunications and internet connections.

Monies for The Universal Service Fund come from mandatory contributions from providers of interstate and international telecommunication services.

Also, the Congressional Research Service reports additional initiatives that can be of assistance in overcoming the Digital Divide.

On January 30, 2020, the FCC announced The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund for geographic areas where no broadband access exists. The \$16 billion in funding is scheduled to begin in October 2020 so states should be preparing to access these resources now.

The \$9 billion Fund for Rural America is designed to provide dollars to carriers to deploy additional mobile wireless services in rural America.

In addition, several states have developed broadband infrastructure deployment programs targeting areas that do not currently have broadband service. These allow applicants to apply for grant funds toward building assets such as fiber optic cable and wireless towers. New York, North Carolina and New Mexico are good examples of this.

Vermont and Georgia are employing Broadband Mapping to pinpoint where broadband services are not available or are not feasible. They then target resources toward improvement in those specific geographic areas.

Several states are also utilizing mandated "right of way" permitting processes to increase available land use possibilities to build out the necessary infrastructure for improved broadband and telecommunications.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ACTION

### 1. SUPPORT PROMISING OR BEST-PRACTICES IN TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION...

...**START EARLY.** Create career pathways and “Grow Your Own” programs to prepare individuals from rural school districts who are committed to return to their community.

...**EXPAND POST-BACCALAUREATE RESIDENCY PROGRAMS.** It is often difficult to establish undergraduate residencies in rural communities due to the distance between the nearest university and school district. In 2016-17, only 9% of rural districts in the state hosted undergraduate teacher residents compared to 39% in urban or suburban school systems<sup>iv</sup>. However, there are strong models of post-baccalaureate residencies that enable rural school systems to identify and build local teaching talent<sup>iv</sup>.

...**INCREASE AWARENESS AND AVAILABILITY OF INCENTIVES.** Loan forgiveness programs and service scholarships that underwrite preparation for teachers who are willing to commit to serving in high-needs rural communities can help attract teachers to rural communities.

...**SUPPORT MENTORS AND INDUCTION PROGRAMS.** In the first year of teaching, 61% of teachers in the most economically disadvantaged rural communities indicated that they did not feel prepared, compared to 51 percent in urban or suburban systems<sup>iv</sup>. Mentor and induction programs have been shown to increase retention.

...**STRENGTHEN ADMINISTRATOR TRAINING PROGRAMS.** Strengthen administrator training programs to develop principals and district leaders who can create a positive working environment and have the instructional leadership skills to support the professional development needs of teachers.

### 2. SHARED SERVICES MODEL ...

#### SEE APPENDIX A FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.

...**PROVIDE GUIDANCE.** The LDOE should further investigate shared service possibilities and provide examples of best practice to districts for their consideration. Legal implications, implementation issues and cost/benefit analysis must be addressed.

...**RESOURCES FOR INNOVATION.** State or contracted services experts, as well as, planning and implementation grants for districts interested in this innovation should be made available.

...**INCREASE AWARENESS OF MODEL.** State-level leadership training should include components analyzing this type of innovation.

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### 3. EXPAND CONNECTIVITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES...

**...UTILIZE AVAILABLE RESOURCES.** The state of Louisiana and local communities should work together to ensure that they are effectively utilizing all currently available resources towards solving this problem.

**...IDENTIFY PROMISING PRACTICES.** In addition, the state should be investigating innovations that are proving effective in other states while continuing to develop creative ideas within Louisiana.

**...ADDRESS CONNECTIVITY AT A STATE LEVEL.** It is not feasible for local school districts to address the infrastructure deficiencies on their own while simultaneously working to improve their distance learning programs for students and providing the professional development needed by teachers and staff.

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### 4. CONTINUE TO SUPPORT INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO EXPAND ACCESS TO ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES AND CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION COURSES...

**...INCREASE AWARENESS AND ACCESS TO EXISTING RESOURCES.** There are already online options for advanced placement courses that have been sanctioned by the College Board.

**...REQUIRE VENDORS TO HAVE A VIRTUAL OPTION.** Dual enrollment providers should be required to have virtual options available.

**...STATE-CREATED, HIGH QUALITY VIRTUAL OPTIONS.** Rural districts do not have the capacity or resources to create high quality virtual content. The state could produce high quality virtual options for all high-level science and math courses where it is so difficult to find qualified staff. This could be housed on the state's Virtual High School.

#### Further Readings:

<https://www.air.org/resource/qa-unique-assets-and-challenges-rural-education>

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<sup>i</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012) Double Jeopardy How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Baltimore, MD: Donald J. Hernandez. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/>

<sup>ii</sup> USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2015 American Community Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/83078/eib-171.pdf?v=6041.3>

<sup>iii</sup> Report to the House Committees on Education of the Louisiana Legislature. Response to House Resolution 228 of the Regular Session January 31, 2020

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teaching/2017-believe-and-prepare-rural-report.pdf>

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APPENDIX A  
SHARED SERVICES

As Louisiana schools begin to open, traditionally or utilizing distance learning, they will be facing significant financial challenges. Therefore, it is prudent to discuss cost-saving options. Shared services models in education serve many purposes. Often, they are used to provide streamlined business services among smaller rural districts. They can be used to increase collective purchasing power that allows districts to buy commodities at a lower price for example. Others may also use this type of arrangement in the hiring of shared business administrators and personnel in human resources, transportation, food services, technology, maintenance, etc. One shared high-quality director in these areas, for example, could save significant dollars for districts within the partnership. This type of structure could prove beneficial in the negotiation of rates and contracts related to distance learning, technology purchases and Broadband development alternatives as prices are often better when there is an economy of scale. While this is not always easy, it can lead to greater consistency across regions or throughout the state and save funding for other purposes.

Shared services arrangements are also used at times for instructional purposes. Hiring certified, high-quality staff in rural areas is often problematic--- especially in low incidence areas which include math, science, special education and related services, for example. Some states utilize this method to employ a Regional Director and administration for special education. They work cooperatively with several small districts to recruit, hire, train and evaluate teachers and associated staff while also assisting with identification and service provision to low incidence categories of special needs students. On a regional basis this can be a cost savings.

In addition, marketing the positive benefits of working in rural communities (tight-knit communities with involved citizens) can become a formalized and consistent recruitment message. Even salaries and benefits can be improved when utilizing this kind of method as larger numbers of employees can produce better benefit options. This is tremendously important in areas where the number of high-quality teachers is at a premium and everyone is vying for the same people.

In order to do some of this, the shared services collaboratives often organize around a separate board structure with the members coming from the partner school districts. Though this is not always easy, as schools are, once again, asked to do more with less, sharing services could become a viable alternative in several areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The LDOE should further investigate these possibilities and provide examples of best practice to districts for their consideration. Legal implications, implementation issues and cost/benefit analysis must be addressed.
- State or contracted services experts, as well as, planning and implementation grants for districts interested in this innovation should be made available.
- State-level leadership training should include components analyzing this type of innovation.