Effective Schooling in Rural Alaska

INTRODUCTION

Rural teachers are not satisfied with their students' academic progress, according to a new University of Alaska report, and they tend to blame the problem on a lack of motivation. On the other hand, the teachers are satisfied with their relationships with both the students and the community.

The report was prepared by the College of Human and Rural Development and the Institute of Social and Economic Research for the Alaska Department of Education. It was based on a survey of 304 rural teachers, representing every school outside Alaska's urban areas (such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau). The teachers identified several educational areas that needed attention. They also described the instructional practices that they found effective in a rural Alaska context. Ninety-six percent of the teachers returned their surveys, an unusually high proportion.

FINDINGS

Satisfaction with Educational and Other Conditions

Most rural teachers, whether they taught in majority Native or non-Native schools, are satisfied with the quality of their relationships with students (92 percent), with discipline in their schools (84 percent), and with school/community relations (73 percent).

Ironically, what frustrates rural teachers, particularly in Native majority communities, is not relationships with people of a different culture, but relationships with the district center. Fewer than half the teachers in Native majority communities are satisfied with the support they receive from the central office (43 percent), with the superintendent’s management (46 percent), and with the district board’s action (46 percent). According to teachers, many district staff do not appreciate the local situation. (We did not survey district staff; their perspective may very well be different.)

Most rural teachers (80 percent) are pleased with their salary and benefits. To our surprise, only about a third voiced dissatisfaction with their housing.

Almost half of the rural teachers want more opportunities for professional growth. One wrote:

I am in a tiny school—one other teacher who is not my husband. I have no one to ask questions of. My class of primary grade children includes an incredible range of students (skill, intelligence, behavior, motivation). I have an unworkable curriculum guide. My district has offered me one training session, one week. I am alone!

Student Achievement: What Teachers Expect

Rural teachers' views of their students' performance are ambivalent. On the one hand, over half the teachers in Native majority schools (52 percent) say they are not satisfied with their students' academic progress. Even more (60 percent) say they cannot expect average or above-average achievement from their students.

Rural teachers expect virtually all their students to graduate from high school. But most teachers in Native majority schools (90 percent) expect less than half their students to attend college.

Despite their pessimistic view of students' academic performance and potential, most teachers in Native majority schools (63 percent) say they are satisfied with the quality of education at the school.

Rural teachers in non-Native majority schools are significantly more satisfied with their students' academic progress. They feel that achievement levels above national norms can be expected from their students. Finally, they are much more likely to expect students to attend college.

These differences between teachers' views in Native and non-Native majority schools are troubling. We are not sure what they mean. Several teachers wrote on the margins of their surveys that we should be careful not to interpret their attitudes as "low expectations." In their view, they are simply being realistic when they say that they do not expect many students to achieve at national norms and that they do not expect many students to attend college.
Indeed, 49 percent of the teachers in Native majority communities say that none of the parents expected students to complete college. "Parents are reluctant to see their children leave home and become indoctrinated in a foreign culture," one teacher explained on the survey.

But teachers also point out that the rural context unjustifiably lowers academic expectations. One said:

My own personal level of expectation has gone down since I arrived here. When I started as an English teacher my expectations were too high. Very quickly my expectations became more realistic. The big problem is that we overcompensate and come to expect too little.

Effective Teaching Practices in Rural Alaska Schools

Rural teachers say their schools do not emphasize many of the practices that are related to high achievement test scores in schools outside Alaska. Most teachers, for example, say their schools do not pay much attention to standardized test scores as a basis for setting academic goals.

Less than half (48 percent) of rural teachers assign homework regularly. Many say they avoid homework because students do not have the needed lighting, space, or opportunity at home.

A large proportion of teachers (40 percent), however, do hold study sessions before or after school once a week or more. These study sessions are advantageous, they say, because the school setting helps students settle down to work and teachers are right there to help.

When asked to describe briefly the instructional practices they personally found effective, rural teachers emphasized some of the practices stressed in national studies of effective schooling and some practices related to the village cultural context. These include:

1. Use of diverse instructional materials and especially projects where students actively do things.
2. Self-paced instruction, especially where the teacher sets standards for the amount of work to be done.

3. Cooperative student learning situations, such as group projects and peer tutoring.
4. Opportunities for parents and community people to participate in schooling, such as sending home nightly study guides.

CONCLUSIONS

We have asked many different people—school superintendents, rural and urban teachers, representatives of professional education organizations—to comment on these findings. Most raise the same issue: How can so many rural teachers say they are satisfied with the quality of education at their schools and then turn around and say they don't expect students to reach national achievement norms or attend college or complete college if they do attend?

Possibly the answer is straightforward: most rural teachers may feel they are working in a difficult situation, with students whose cultural traditions do not necessarily support academic achievement or college attendance, and whose parents are not often oriented toward these goals. They may feel that under these circumstances, they and their schools are doing a fine job. But the disturbing issues remain: do teachers expect too little of village students? And what should count as "educational success" in rural Alaska? Such questions as these must be answered before we can reasonably expect to improve the effectiveness of rural schooling in Alaska.

This report, entitled Effective Schooling in Rural Alaska (27 pages), was prepared by Judith Kleinfeld and G. Williamson McDiarmid under the auspices of the College of Human and Rural Development and the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska. The teacher survey on which the report was based was part of a study of school governance in rural Alaska, conducted by Dr. Gerald McBeath at the University of Alaska with the assistance of the authors and others. The report is available from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, 204 Chapman Building, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK 99701, or from ISER in Anchorage, 707 A St., Suite 206, Anchorage, AK 99501, telephone 278-4621. For more information on this report, call Judith Kleinfeld, ISER-Fairbanks, 474-7435.