



# BEATING THE ODDS HIGH PERFORMING, SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE RURAL SOUTH

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A Rural School and Community Trust Policy Paper  
Prepared for the Southern Rural High School Study Initiative

*A joint venture of the  
Southern Governors' Association  
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The Rural School and Community Trust*

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The Southern Rural High School Study Initiative seeks to identify high performing rural high schools in the South, engage education leaders in the region in analyzing the challenges faced by these schools, and consider the public policies that might serve to transfer the lessons and strategies used by these schools to other small rural high schools in the region. The purpose of this paper is to discuss policy options based on both our prior knowledge and also site visits to five such high performing small rural high schools serving high poverty and/or high minority populations.

## Seven Principles for Good Rural High Schools

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The Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) defines a “good” rural high school as one that displays excellence in meeting these seven principles:

1. **Curriculum and Instruction.** Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live. Content and strategies are rigorous, authentic and expansive, engaging every student in a personalized learning environment at the highest level of his or her capabilities and preparing each child well for college, work, and citizenship.
2. **Community Connectedness.** The school is situated and structured such that it is connected to the community on multiple levels. The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to learn, work, live, and play.
3. **Democratic Practice.** Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to instill. All stakeholders’ voices are heard, validated, and honored in the decision-making processes affecting them.
4. **Supporting Structures.** School policies, calendars, and resources are arranged to maximize community involvement, ensure student academic success, and provide teachers the means to succeed.
5. **Staffing.** School staffing resources are adequate; staff is competent, caring and aligned to meet stated goals.
6. **Facilities.** Facilities are clean, safe, orderly, and well-equipped to support rigorous academic goals and co-curricular activities.
7. **Leadership.** School leaders provide competent and knowledgeable management that supports teaching and learning at high levels.

## Finding High Performing Small High Schools in the South

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Under the terms of the present project, we identified over 50 small high schools in nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia) that met the criteria set by the project for high performance by a

small high school in a challenging socioeconomic environment.

Data sources used for identifying schools included the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and individual state departments of education. Common Core of Data (CCD)

information was accessed from the NCES website using the Build-a-Table application, and state achievement data was accessed from state department of education websites and personnel. Using CCD, schools were identified that are located in rural communities or small towns (locale codes 6, 7, and 8) and are both (1) below the median size for their state (using cohort enrollment, or total enrollment divided by grade span) and (2) above the median student poverty level (using percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals). State achievement data was then reviewed to determine which of the schools meeting the above criteria had (1) made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in all areas and among all subgroups, and (2) scored above the state mean on all mandatory assessments.

From this universe of small high schools, we selected five for site visits based on our familiarity with similarly situated schools, the diversity of the state policy environments and the social and economic contexts in which they function, and the willingness of their leadership to accommodate our visit.

### How These Schools Match the Rural Trust Definition of a “Good Rural High School”

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These schools all rate quite high on most, but not all of the seven principles by which the Rural Trust defines a good rural high school. They all meet about 70 percent of our criteria. In particular, they displayed excellence in leadership, staffing, support structures, instructional practice (team teaching, collaboration, and innovation were all palpable) and to some extent in democratic practice, especially where teacher empowerment is concerned.

The leadership in these schools is superior, stable, competent, and creative. It is clear that these schools are focused on a mission and goals that have been explicitly identified in a cohesive plan produced collaboratively by leaders, teachers, and parents or community members. The sense of shared responsibility for the success or the failure of the school is very apparent. This is doubtless the hallmark of strong leadership that consistently, among these schools, emphasized

The five site visits were conducted at:

- Central High School, Lowndes County, Alabama
- Frederick Fraize High School, Cloverport, Kentucky
- Sicily Island High School, Sicily Island, Louisiana
- Shaw High School, Shaw, Mississippi
- Phelps Jr/Sr High School, Phelps, Kentucky

The SGA site visit teams selected Shaw High School for a site visit. Rural Trust personnel visited Shaw and the other four schools separately.

Many other schools on the larger list could have been selected for site visits. The visits were fundamentally valuable as case studies in the good work of dedicated rural educators, and we are confident that there is much more to learn from other strong small high schools in the region.

positive reinforcement and minimized negative sanctions. These folks are “in it together.”

In general, these schools do not use approved schools reform models. Shaw High School does make use of *First Things First*, and Central High School employs a locally developed model that adapts some elements of approved models. Mostly, these schools use diverse proven practices widely recognized as effective pedagogy, blended together to suit local needs.

A common element of these schools’ plans is that they call for many of the education professionals to play multiple roles. In particular, it was noticeable that teachers also serve as mentors to less experienced teachers, as well as tutors, advisors, and counselors of students. The focus of this set of roles is the “whole student,” and the smallness of these schools is a central feature enabling teachers to provide the level of

intensive support needed. The roles are integrated and teachers get the time to incorporate these many roles into their professional life. A key trade-off of small size and multiple roles is a narrow curriculum that reduces the risk that teachers will be spread too thin (see section “Some Shortcomings” below).

The quality of the people working in these schools is unmistakable. But in saying that, we offer this caution: they are not geniuses whose work is beyond replication by others. They are dedicated and hard-working, and many of them are indigenous to the community or the region in which they teach—not just in the community, but of it. Turnover rate is low, collegiality is high, new members of the staff are welcomed and integrated, and professional development is taken seriously, tailored to needs defined by assessment, and provided internally when possible. Continuous, classroom level assessment that affects teaching is also common, a product of the individual attention made possible by small school size and modest student-teacher ratios. But it is hard work, not extraordinary talent, that produces the achievement in these schools.

The self-discipline and professionalism of these educators permeates the school and is reflected in the behavior and consequently the performance of the students. Discipline problems are very low, attendance and graduation rates are higher than state averages, and expectations sharp. There is an emphasis on academic excel-

lence with high expectations for everyone, and there is no tracking (a collateral benefit in part due to their smallness, but also consistent with the philosophy in these schools). In fact, at least one school makes it easy for students to move across tracking boundaries set in state policy.

The students in these schools consistently demonstrate a sense of pride and a determination to beat the socio-economic odds that place them at high risk of academic failure. Students expressed time and again they feel as though they belong, feel needed, get attention, and are individually conspicuous. They told us of their desire to “show the world we can do it,” to “do better than they expect us to,” and to “do good so they can’t close our school.” When asked what would happen if a student failed to appear for detention (the principle means of discipline), the students interviewed at Sicily Island were baffled. As far as they knew, that had never happened and they could not imagine it happening. The success of these schools has a lot to do with relationships, attitudes, and respect. They are disciplined by pride.

There is also a commitment to innovation and to sharing. Team teaching is common, interdisciplinary courses are not exceptional, and the use of technology is embraced. The small size of these schools makes these practices easier—they are able to be flexible in scheduling and sharing resources.

## Some Shortcomings

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These schools were most likely to fall short of the evidence of excellence we were looking for in the areas of community connectedness, democratic practice, and curriculum. The shortcomings were fairly consistent. There was some evidence of the schools asking for help from the community to further their academic mission. Job shadowing, for example, is a common practice. There is not much evidence of the school engaging in “authentic” academic work of direct value to the community. And, while teachers were clearly an important part of the decision

making in the school, students had little voice and parents or others in the community were minimally engaged in curriculum and policy decisions.

Most notably, while the curriculum in these schools is rigorous at the basic core, it is quite narrowly focused on test score improvement and weak with respect to authenticity—i.e., not focused on real world needs of citizenship and work or relevant to the problems of the community. In every case, there is evidence that: the

focus on test-score improvement has overpowered other worthy objectives; teaching to the test is common practice (although pedagogy might well be innovative); and the curriculum is narrowly defined by standardized test content. This is almost certainly a trade-off against the increased demands that are placed on teachers to play many other roles supporting the “whole student.” In terms of academic richness and achievement, the schools try to compensate for a thin curriculum through interdisciplinary courses, team teaching, collaborative faculty, cooperative learning, and individualized instruction. People—students and teachers—work together. We know these students score well on

standardized tests, but we do not know how well they do when they enter college, or whether they can think critically and be analytical problem solvers.

Nonetheless, these schools meet many of our criteria for excellence and perform well on standardized tests. The following policy implications reflect what we learned from these site visits. We have not tried to evaluate how current policies in the states in which these schools are located match the policy needs of these schools, nor have we thoroughly considered the extent to which current state policies throughout the region generally reflect these needs.

## Policy Implications

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We present some very general suggestions for policy alternatives that would support the good practices we observed in these schools. We note that this is a small sample of schools and caution that further work would likely result in more definitive recommendations.

### *1. Respect and Support the Advantages of Smallness*

Research supports the conclusions that smallness is both directly and indirectly of value in fostering academic achievement (Cotton 2001, Raywid 2001). Directly, “smallness” establishes an environment that supports personal, human relationships that encourage responsibility, mutual trust, and accountability. Indirectly, smallness facilitates other pedagogical, curricular, and governance reforms that are proven to improve achievement but are more difficult to implement in large bureaucratic settings. These include: team teaching, integrated curriculum, multi-age grouping (especially for elementary children), cooperative learning, and performance assessments (Cotton 2001).

In many cases, state policies can frustrate good practices by discouraging smallness and expecting small schools to be organized, structured, and run like larger schools. The schools we vis-

ited for this project have managed to overcome any such policy discouragement that may exist in their home states.

State policy should therefore explicitly respect and support the advantages of smallness: small class size, more individualized instruction, more flexible scheduling, and more personal relationships. In particular, the state might want to conduct or sponsor research to estimate the cost of an education that meets state academic standards and accreditation requirements for schools of various sizes. For small high schools, such cost studies should recognize such factors as:

- The multiple roles played by teachers and administrators. High per pupil instructional costs or low student/teacher ratios, for example, should be recognized as a reflection of the multiple non-instructional roles teachers in small schools are expected to play. They serve as advisors (more than guidance counselors), parent liaisons, and mentors to beginning teachers (a position more likely to be occupied by induction specialists in larger schools). In these successful schools we visited, teachers did everything from bake the pies at the parent-in-education night to tutor students in need and advise the “whole child” in personal matters.

- The cost of managing inter-local sharing of students and faculty through distance learning technologies, as well as the fixed capital cost of providing the technology and the professional development cost of supporting the teachers who use it.
- The high fixed costs of mandated curriculum. Small schools will need to have lower student to teacher ratios in order to provide a rich curriculum.
- The need to provide compensation adequate enough to overcome teacher reluctance to serve high needs students in low wealth, remote districts.

State funding formulas should then reflect the realities of the costs of small high schools. In particular, it would help the schools we visited if funding formulas recognize smallness as an affordable and cost-effective strategy for mitigating the aggravating and cumulative negative effect of poverty on student achievement. Research has well established that smaller schools improve achievement among lower income students and reduce the achievement gap between more and less affluent students. In fact, the higher the rate of poverty in a school, the more students benefit from small size (Howley and Howley).

While many states provide added weight in their funding formula for low-income students, it would also be useful for states to consider varying the weights within the poverty rates on the assumption that the added cost of teaching higher poverty populations is not constant, but exponential (that is, the added cost of educating a low-income child is probably greater when 90 percent of the students in a school are low-income than when only 10 percent are low-income). In high poverty schools, the performance of affluent as well as poor children is affected, and low income students in those schools are doubly at risk (U.S. Department of Education 1996).

By increasing funding formula weights as poverty rates increase, states would be concentrating aid where needs are greatest (e.g., Nebraska). For small schools serving the poorest communities, this would provide greater capacity to maintain their primary advantage—their small size.

Many states have become weary of funneling more funding into large schools that serve poor children badly. It makes more sense to pour more money into small schools where the prospect for improvement, especially among poor children, is much better. Moreover, since research indicates that because small high schools have higher graduation rates, their costs per graduate are comparable to larger schools (Funk and Bailey 1999, Stiefel et al 1998). An increased investment in smaller schools is effective in many ways.

States can also encourage maintenance of small schools by limiting the length of bus rides students must endure.

## *2. Mitigate the Disadvantages of Smallness*

Small schools have the disadvantage of high cost per pupil because of high fixed costs (primarily of facilities and curricular requirements) and unfunded mandates.

States can directly address the higher per pupil costs of small schools by adding a small school adjustment factor in its aid formula.

They can also help small school or small districts achieve indirect economies of scale:

- Encourage inter-local cooperation in all areas from fiscal management to distance learning, but without diminishing local authority. To the contrary in many states, such cooperation actually *increases* (see section 7 below).
- Make cost-effective use of distance learning technology to help small schools share students and teachers through two-way interactive television supported by good professional development and cooperative

planning (e.g., Missouri and expected soon, Arkansas).

- Encourage cooperative identification, planning, and delivery of professional development services

### *3. Increase the Capacity of Small, Low-Wealth Rural Districts to Attract and Keep Highly Qualified Teachers and Administrators*

States cannot invent too many ways to attract highly qualified teachers and administrators to the poorest, lowest performing schools in the most remote and isolated communities. To do so, states have to address issues relating to the professional lives of their employees as well as issues related to compensation.

#### *a. Improve the professional lives of teachers and administrators in hard-to-staff schools.*

The high performing schools we visited clearly have a very low personnel turnover rate. This sets them apart from most similarly situated schools. Nationally, teachers leave the profession at an alarming rate (a third fail to last three years, triple the drop-out rate of other professionals) and they leave small, high-poverty districts at an even faster rate (Ingersoll 2001). While salary and other remuneration factors are certainly important (see part B, this section, below), most departing teachers report that other reasons were more important in their decision to quit. A lot of emphasis is on the professional life of the teacher.

- Provide new teachers with a veteran-teacher mentor who is given release time to provide support to the beginning teacher.
- Focus teacher professional development on skills and practices that benefit small faculties, including team teaching, interdisciplinary cooperation, collaboration, and collegial decision making.
- Help small schools help each other provide high-quality professional develop-

ment. Some of the best professional development expertise may be available to help teachers in small, low-wealth schools in the form of the veteran teachers dispersed among these schools. Emphasis should therefore be placed on “insourcing” professional development services. The state can play a vital role in providing training to veteran teachers willing to become mentors, by helping small schools collectively: define their professional development needs; identify the best way to meet those needs, relying as much as possible on indigenous expertise; and coordinate delivery of professional development services within a network of similarly situated schools. Distance learning technology can play a vital role in this process, though it is not the only delivery vehicle for professional development services. The state can mandate and fund institutions of higher education to participate in such networks. The delivery of these services can be an integral part of a broader program to engage small schools in designated “education renewal zones” (see section 8, below).

- In a similar vein, the state can identify highly skilled teachers in high-performing small high schools who can be assigned for limited periods to help low-performing schools improve, rewarding the teachers and their home school financially, and providing for their return to the home school. (e.g., Louisiana has a distinguished educator program).
- Pay the certification process fee for teachers seeking National Board Certification (e.g., Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Oklahoma).
- Recognize and reward community service by professional educators. For example, states might provide grants for school-community partnerships in which school faculty time is “bought” by a local government unit or a non-profit development corporation for professional services re-

lated to community development such as housing, economic development, and cultural affairs. Since teachers and administrators are often the best educated people in small communities, employing them in service to the community strengthens their ties to the community, improves school-community relationships, and has the effect of making instructional costs more variable, reducing instructional economies of scale.

#### *b. Level the Competition for Highly Qualified Teachers*

In general, nationally and in the South, rural teachers are paid less than teachers in other locales (Beeson and Strange 2003). This is true at all levels of experience and training—for beginning, average, and highest salaries on the pay scale. The gap is widest at the highest salary level, where the veteran teachers with the highest credentials are most competitively sought after by wealthy districts. The labor market disadvantage of poor rural districts is aggravated by the demands placed on all districts by No Child Left Behind, and by the growing unattractiveness of teaching in any district classified as “low-performing” and subject to sanctions under state and/or federal law.

Though other factors (especially lack of administrative support, low level of participation in decision making, and poor student discipline) are cited as *more important* factors in teachers’ decision to quit the profession, none of them is cited more *frequently* than low pay (Ingersoll 2001). There is no mistaking that poor districts serving socio-economically challenged communities, especially in isolated rural environments, are at a competitive disadvantage in the market for highly qualified teachers. Poor districts often cannot pay salaries that will attract and retain such teachers even if the districts are able to fulfill potential teachers’ other professional and personal aspirations. At least one of the schools we visited for this project could not provide a “living wage” to its faculty. It is clear that higher compensation (whether pay, incentives and bonuses, or other remuneration) is a necessary,

though not sufficient factor in preventing the out-migration of new teachers. Even among the successful schools we visited for this project, all of which have low teacher turnover rates, low pay is a primary factor in the decision of newer teachers to leave.

Some policy options to consider:

- Use state aid to assure small, poor, rural districts in designated “critical shortage areas” have adequate resources to compete in the market for highly qualified teachers:
  - Where state salary structures exist (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia) and local supplements give the competitive advantage in the teacher market to high-wealth districts, states need to provide some form of supplement to low-wealth districts in order to “level up” the playing field.
  - Eliminate the use of “cost of living” adjustments in funding formulas. They also favor wealthy districts because the highest cost communities are those with expensive housing.
  - Weight the funding formula instead with “cost of hiring” adjustments based on state-funded research into what it would cost to get highly qualified teachers to teach in critical shortage areas.
- Weight the state aid formula to reflect the training and experience of each school’s faculty, establishing a minimum aid level that, in effect, provides an incentive for hard-to-staff schools to upgrade faculty (e.g., New Mexico)
- Set a minimum beginning teacher salary (e.g., Arkansas, Oklahoma, Florida, and South Carolina).
- Provide incentives to teach in small, or in critical shortage areas (locales and sub-

jects), such as housing incentives, relocation expenses, loans and loan forgiveness, (all in use in Mississippi) or income tax credits (e.g., California)

#### 4. Modernize Facilities

The physical infrastructure in which teachers teach and students learn is central to the education enterprise. But small, rural schools are too often abandoned where building maintenance is concerned. Small schools are assumed to have expensive fixed costs that contribute heavily to high per pupil expenditures and most states have historically deferred most of the capital cost of schooling to local taxpayers. This is an especially heavy burden on low-wealth rural communities that has frequently resulted in deferred maintenance (i.e., allowing facilities to deteriorate while reserving local tax revenues for operating expenses). Courts have increasingly considered poor facilities as evidence of an unconstitutionally inadequate and/or inequitable state school finance system. State remedies have repeatedly provided more centralized financing of facilities under terms that discriminate against small schools in the misguided belief that they are more expensive to build and operate. Recent research has shown that over a 10-year period, below-median size schools (among those built within research-based pedagogically reasonable size parameters) are less expensive than above-median sized schools, whether measured on the basis of cost per square foot or cost per pupil (Lawrence et al 2003). The prejudice against small schools in the area of capital construction should be eliminated.

- Establish mechanisms for equitable financing of facilities (i.e., not dependent on local wealth) based on need, not competitive first-come-first-served process (e.g., Kentucky's equalization formula allocates a greater share of aid to low-wealth districts). Combining funding mechanisms (direct aid, matching grants, interest subsidies, or debt servicing aid) may provide maximum flexibility for targeting aid to districts with the highest needs and least fiscal capacity (Georgia relaxes some

restrictions on access to facilities grants for districts in the bottom wealth quartile).

- Require regular reports on the status of school facilities, including a self-assessment of needs.
- Do not favor new construction over renovation or repair:
  - Eliminate restrictions on the number of times or the frequency a building may be renovated or repaired;
  - Require a renovation feasibility study prior to providing support for new construction and assure that consultants performing the study are not eligible for contracts involving potential new construction;
  - Discourage deferred maintenance by requiring that a percentage of the replacement cost of the facility be spent on maintenance or held in reserve for maintenance; in the alternative, provide state cost-share for maintenance based on district fiscal capacity factors.
- Avoid minimum acreage requirements—they discourage renovation, repair, or remodeling; tend to separate schools from communities by placing them in open country; encourage sprawl; and increase cost.
- Avoid arbitrary minimum enrollment standards as a condition of state facilities aid.

At the same time, steps can be taken to make new small high school construction more cost-effective.

- Share facilities with other compatible agencies—libraries, health clinics, day care, community development corporations, adult education providers, family resource centers, community colleges, social services, municipal buildings, and parks and recreation programs. This will lower costs and coordinate services.

- Build more K-12 schools. One of the most effective ways to lower capital construction costs of small high schools is to build them with K-8 elementary schools (see next section).

### 5. Establish Broader Grade Span Configurations

In short, bring back the K-12 unit school. All forms of specialization mitigate against efficiency in sparsely populated areas, but recent limited research in five states (Louisiana, Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas) suggests that broader grade span configurations improve student academic achievement (Coladarci and Hancock 2002a, Coladarci and Hancock 2002b). This is probably a result of providing greater continuity for students (fewer transitions), reducing the number of schools parents must build relationships with, and shortening bus rides by reducing catchment-area size. The broader configuration also facilitates a more aligned curriculum across all levels of instruction. Significantly, this structural reform is unlikely to cost more. The Texas study measured cost per unit of student achievement for K-12 unit schools compared to others and found that all else equal, Texas unit schools produce a given level of 10th grade achievement more cost-effectively than other schools (Bickel et al 2001).

### 6. Establish Modest Curricular Requirements and Enriched Curricular Opportunity

A standard criticism of small schools is that they cannot provide a “rich” curriculum affordably. In fact, all five of the high performing schools we visited provided a bare-bones, basic curriculum with few if any advanced placement classes, dual enrollment programs, or even upper level basic courses. All five focused on course work necessary to improve test scores.

While we would not endorse a narrow curriculum of mere basics, it is important to note that recent research suggests that the larger the school, the richer the curricular offerings but the lower the rate of participation in the coursework

offered (Uerling and Dlugosh 2003). Most students actually do less in larger schools with a wide curriculum. If the objective is to help small schools become all that these exemplary schools are, it is probably unwise to require more than a core curriculum carefully aligned to state standards. To do otherwise would increase costs per pupil, increase the number of faculty teaching out-of-field or on the margins of their competency, and do little to improve achievement.

At the same time, however, modest curricular requirements can be augmented by state policies that enrich the offerings available. Low-demand, high-cost courses can often be supplied by distance learning technology or by team teaching. Team teaching clearly gave the schools we visited an opportunity to get the most out of the synergy of faculty cooperation; common time for planning was an important feature enabling team teaching. To accommodate this, schools had to have flexible scheduling and breathing room in the curriculum requirements.

Small schools should be given the opportunity and encouragement to use their discretion to practice *place-based learning*—learning that is rooted in the unique history, culture, environment and economy of a particular place. The community provides a context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning. The local focus has the power to engage students academically, pairing relevance with rigor, while opening windows to the world and promoting genuine citizenship. State standards or frameworks should include the need to learn about the world by understanding the local.

In short, standardization of the curriculum should be limited to core content necessary to meet state standards, and beyond that, small high schools should customize their curriculum to their students’ needs.

Finally, we note that some states require that high schools offer a series of diplomas with variable graduation requirements. This certainly

stretches the resources of small schools and encourages the suspect practice of academic tracking in which not all tracks are equally academically rigorous. All routes to a diploma should lead to a meaningful post-secondary educational opportunity, and where tracks exist, it should be easy for students to move from one to another.

### *7. Offer Flexible Assessments Appropriate to Small Cohorts*

In general, the qualities of a good assessment system do not vary with school size or demographics. A good assessment system is undertaken continuously by teachers at the classroom level, frequently by students, parents, and teachers consultatively, and occasionally by the community and by standardized testing as part of large-scale assessment. A variety of assessment methods should be used, including those that require constructed responses, performance of skills, portfolio preparation, and standardized testing. Assessment should be designed to have maximum impact on teaching practice as it is applied to the individual being assessed. Significant decisions about graduating or promoting a student or about his or her placement in challenging classes, should not be based on the results of a single test.

Standardized tests are an appropriate and useful form of testing, especially where the requirements are large-scale and the breadth of content to be tested is wide. It is crucial that such tests be carefully matched to the curriculum, and that the curriculum reflects the academic standards expected of the school. Assessment should measure student performance against content standards that have dictated the subject of the curriculum.

But the exclusive use of standardized tests to measure school-level performance and to trigger accountability mechanisms is fraught with problems for small rural schools serving socio-economically challenging populations. It becomes even more of a problem when they are used to measure year-to-year changes in student achievement levels as they are under most state

accountability systems and as mandated by No Child Left Behind.

The principle flaw in this use of standardized tests is that the small cohort size in small schools makes results expressed as the annual percentage of students above a specified cut score statistically unreliable as a measure of school performance. Many of the mechanisms now being accepted by the federal government in implementing No Child Left Behind in small schools, including the use of statistically derived confidence intervals and multiple year score averaging, should be adopted by the states in implementing their own accountability systems. Large scale assessments are dangerous tools to use in measuring small school performance (*Note: They are as likely to unreliably overrate performance as to unreliably underrate performance, so they can result in misallocation of rewards as well as sanctions.*)

Another option is to provide an alternative “small school review” for cases in which test score results provide a statistically unreliable basis for assessing school performance. A small school review might consist of alternative assessment systems that include portfolios, site visits by peers or state personnel, and other approaches yielding a more complete picture of performance (e.g., Vermont)

Some portion of every assessment system should depend on student performances that are not contrived for the purpose of the test alone, but that matter because they are independently important to significant third parties (parents, adults, community organizations). Concrete testing based on real performance expectations can be among the strongest forms of assessment, having the greatest effect on both students and teachers who can see, immediately and tangibly, the results of their learning and teaching efforts.

### *8. Authorize Leaders to Lead*

The first principle of accountability is that those held accountable for outcomes must have the authority to make decisions that affect those outcomes. Local school boards and administra-

tors in small schools and districts should be vested with the authority to make, and the capacity to carry out, decisions that affect the performance of their teachers and students.

The advantages of smallness do not extend to schools alone—the decision-making units that govern them also benefit. To the extent that districts are independent and local, with capacity to make hiring, spending, curricular, and other decisions, accountability for outcomes is logical. To the extent they are constrained by choices made by other authorities, it is not.

For small schools, local autonomy is especially important because centralized decision making is often influenced by the way the world looks and works in larger schools and communities.

- Avoid categorical funding. In small schools, categorical funding of programs often results in many small and inefficiently used pockets of change supporting inadequate and fragmented efforts rather than a focused and cohesive strategy to improve achievement. Give leaders discretion to focus the resources available to them. Exceptions should be made only where fundamental rights are involved, such as access to facilities or civil rights.
- Preserve small districts. Research indicates that low-income children perform better academically not only in small schools, but in small districts as well (Johnson 2004, and Johnson, Howley, and Howley 2002). The economic inefficiencies of small administrative units can be addressed in ways other than diminishing their authority to govern small schools (see above).
- Alternatively, states should employ site-based management systems that empower small schools within larger districts to make more decisions independently. The site-based management should consist of both administrative leaders on site and elected governing councils.

- Small schools, whether in small districts or in site-based management situations, should have, at a minimum, the authority to:
  - a. Prepare and manage their own budget
  - b. Hire and fire faculty and leaders
  - c. Make curriculum decisions

### *9. Authorize and Fund Education Renewal Zones*

Similarly situated small schools in distressed regions might be authorized to enter into cooperative arrangements called Education Renewal Zones (e.g., Arkansas, Missouri). Typically, these inter-local entities would partner with SEA providers or cooperative service agencies and institutions of higher education. In general, and as noted in several places above, it is the purpose of these enterprises to:

- Share students and faculty through two-way interactive TV, capturing economies of scale for small schools and enabling them to both provide high-cost, low demand courses more efficiently and optimize team teaching.
- Cooperatively define and serve the professional development needs of their faculties.
- Learn from each other's successful practices.

### *10. Provide Positive Leadership*

An unmistakable characteristic of the high-performing small schools we visited for this project are the leaders who lead by building positive relationships throughout the school community. There is a joyful, friendly, positive feeling about these schools, and it inevitably starts at the top. States can do the same thing. The language, method, and measure of state accountability systems can be made more positive than most are. “Low-Performing Schools” can become “Priority Schools” (e.g., Mississippi, Tennessee). Sanctions can become supports. High perform-

ing schools can be relieved of some regulatory burdens or provided greater autonomy to innovate (e.g., Tennessee). High performing small high schools serving the poorest communities can get the headlines. Make an example of what

works rather than what does not. Positive reinforcement motivates and inspires people. It underutilized in today's education policy environment.

## Conclusion

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The schools we visited for this project are but a sub-sample of small high schools that do well serving high poverty communities, many of them minority communities, in the South. They face the same challenges as many more schools that do not perform as well. These “best in the class” high schools offer lessons to be learned.

We have barely begun to learn those lessons, but some seem especially clear:

1. These schools are structurally simple, but organically complex. Significantly, only one school has adopted a packaged school reform model. The others have developed their own cohesive plan, picking and choosing from among features of reform models that seem to respect their circumstance. Doing well is less about pedagogy, programs, and professionalism than it is about how people treat each other. The human relationships are what make them successful. The “hardware” of school reform is not as important as the “software.”
2. Smallness is a blessing because it fosters those kinds of relationships, but also because it facilitates the practices that make these schools successful—team teaching, consensus building behind clear goals, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, and performance assessments. The people in these small schools have no doubts that their smallness is a blessing, not a curse. They don't see “what can't be done because we are so small.” They see “what can be done because we are not too big.”
3. It all begins with good leadership that is positive, flexible, creative, and collegial. Teachers are empowered by such leaders to make important decisions, to work together, and they are given the time to plan that

work. Teachers are instructors and much more—mentors, advisors, and counselors. Hierarchy is not readily apparent in these schools, and people are not “cast” in limiting roles.

4. The good work done in these schools is the hard work of caring and competent people, but not the work of genius. These schools exude an environment in which ordinary people achieve extraordinary ends because they work in an environment that not only *expects* the best of everyone, but also *brings out* the best in everyone.

Our policy recommendations build on the South's embrace of the standards-based reform movement, including rigorous academic standards, aligned curriculum, standardized assessments, and accountability systems. In some respects, the reliance on large scale assessment and accountability that is inherent in these policies makes them a formidable challenge for small schools whose strengths are not in numbers, but in personalization. The recommendations we make above are intended to make standards-based reforms work their best in the high schools serving the poorest and smallest communities of the South.

Taken at their most fundamental level, these recommendations imply two balancing strategies that should be juxtaposed with the *assessment-accountability* strategy now so widely in place in the South and elsewhere.

First, small schools must have the *flexibility* to use their resources in the most cost effective way possible. They need to be able to adapt curriculum, multiple assessment, pedagogy, calendar and schedule to their needs, making use of inter-

local arrangements whenever possible to pool talent and cut costs. The more centralized the decision making about what actually happens in a school, the less likely that teachers will be empowered and the more likely that practices requiring scale will prevail, pitting a schools' smallness and its intimacy against itself.

Second, they need the *resources* to compete in the increasingly competitive market for teachers and administrators, to keep facilities and equipment up-to-date, and to pay for the cost of their most valuable asset—their smallness. Small

works and is cost effective, when supported by the kind of policy choices we recommend here.

Beating the odds against student achievement is an honorable achievement. The schools we have identified and scrutinized here are schools that the Governors of their respective states can rightfully be proud of. But the goal of all policy is not to praise those who beat the odds, but to change the odds themselves. By learning from these schools and putting in place policies that reward and encourage others to do what these schools do right, states can do just that.

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