

TEXAS RURAL SCHOOLS TASK FORCE REPORT

Elevating Support for Texas Rural and Small Schools



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**Texas Rural Schools Task Force Report
March 31, 2017**

Table of Contents

Texas Rural Schools Task Force: Executive Summary 4

Teacher Recruitment: 4

Teacher Retention: 5

House Bill 5/CTE Supports: 5

Grants and Contracts: 5

Rural Support in General: 6

Introduction 7

Recommendations of the Texas Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF) 8

Texas Rural Schools Task Force: Executive Summary

The Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF) was formed at the request of Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, to identify current challenges and best practices for rural school districts statewide, and develop recommendations for the Texas Education Agency that would support rural schools and districts in overcoming obstacles and meeting the needs of Texas rural students. The Task Force identified four priority issues: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5/career and technical education (CTE) support, and grants and contracts. The recommendations for these issues, as well as some general recommendations provide substantial leverage for supporting the pressing needs of rural schools and districts.



Teacher Recruitment:

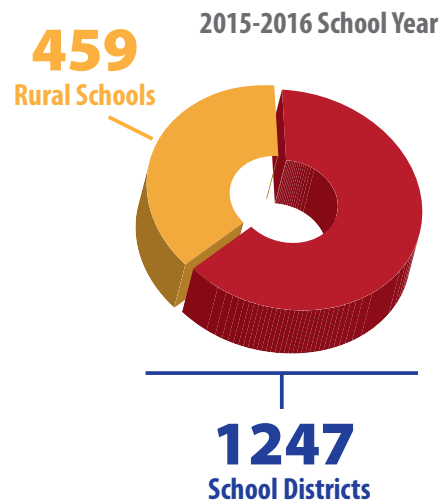
1. Encourage and support the implementation of “Grow Your Own” programs on high school campuses through a variety of means including the public service endorsement in high school career pathways, dual credit opportunities in education coursework, exploring the possibility of an Early College High School model and other innovative initiatives
2. Explore the potential for a centralized, online statewide job application and vacancy matching site.
3. Promote the profession of teaching as rewarding and impactful.
4. Encourage Educator Preparation Programs to increase awareness of rural teaching opportunities.
5. Broaden the pool of potential teachers by exploring the potential for flexibility in certification to include non-certified but qualified personnel to teach CTE courses, for certified personnel to teach outside of their field, and increasing opportunities for retired teachers to return to full-time teaching.





Introduction

Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state in the United States. In the 2015-2016 school year, rural schools, as classified by the TEA, accounted for 459 of the 1247 school districts in Texas, including charters, juvenile justice, and state schools for the deaf and blind or visually impaired. If independent towns and non-metropolitan areas are added to this number, a total of 730 of the 1247 districts would be included.



<http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/analyze/1516/gloss1516.html#Rural>

Teacher recruitment, teacher retention, educator and community isolation, and financial and human capital are a few of the many issues that Texas rural schools and districts face. While some of these issues are not exclusive to rural districts, rural districts contend with unique and nuanced obstacles. Texas rural districts know all too well the challenges they face and are implementing innovative promising practices to address them as best they can. Even so, operational and other limitations given the size, resources, and capacities of their schools and districts ultimately affect the students they serve.

In order to ensure ALL students in the state of Texas, particularly those in rural districts, have effective schools that equip them with the knowledge and skills to be successful in college, career, and life, it is essential that TEA recognize and differentiate support to meet the unique needs of rural school districts. When it comes to school districts in Texas, one size does not fit all.

The Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF) was formed at the request of Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, to identify current challenges and best practices for rural school districts statewide. The Task Force was also charged with developing recommendations for TEA that would support rural schools and districts in overcoming obstacles and meeting the needs of Texas rural students.

The Task Force identified four priority issues: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5/ career and technical education support, and grants and contracts¹. Below are recommendations for these issues, as well as some general recommendations, all of which provide substantial leverage for supporting the pressing needs of rural schools and districts.

¹ Many issues were identified, and particularly issues regarding the inequity of the funding formula and other funding related initiatives. The RSTF decided to focus on the efforts where TEA has locus of control and decision making authority.



Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 3

Promote the profession of teaching as a dignified and impactful.

Promoting the teaching profession will help to unite all stakeholders (communities, parents/





Currently, though, rules regarding rehiring a retired teacher requires most to wait at least one year after a break in employment that is covered by the TRS before returning to the classroom. Returning any sooner means that the teacher cannot receive monthly TRS checks unless they are working part-time or as a substitute. In addition, districts who hire retired teachers must contribute 14.5 percent of the teacher's salary to TRS (for the 2016-17 school year) and pay TRS-Care (\$535 per month for 2016-17) on behalf of the rehired retiree, unless the teacher retired prior to September 1, 2005 (Texas Classroom Teachers Association, 2016) The district is allowed to take these costs out of the salary of the teacher, but the district cannot reduce the



Teacher Retention – Recommendation 6

Encourage implementation of career paths for each including leadership opportunities, differentiated compensation, and other opportunities for high performing educators.

Developing and implementing career pathways for teachers requires joint responsibility among the rural districts, Regional Education Service Centers, and the Texas Education Agency. Rural districts will need to identify potential areas for teacher leadership within their district, such as positions as lead teacher, peer instructional coach, technology leader, teacher mentor, campus improvement team leader, or other areas that will support improvement. Regional Education Service Centers could create leadership or administration academies to increase teachers' skills in fulfilling these roles and principals' skills in distributing leadership on a campus.

Benefits to career pathways for teachers include:

- Teachers' skills and experience can be validated.
- Teachers may take greater ownership in the success of the district.
- Teachers can advance their careers and salaries without leaving the classroom.
- More instructional leaders will be created within the district.
- Teachers can take some of the administrative tasks from campus principals, allowing them to focus on instructional leadership.

TEA should provide flexibility or additional funding to local rural districts to help increase teacher salary for these additional duties and allow districts to provide incentives for a career path within a rural district.

House Bill 5/CTE Supports





House Bill 5/CTE Supports – Recommendation 8

Increase the availability and accessibility of online learning, including the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) by adding incentives, aggregating and purchasing, eliminating financial disincentives, reducing fees and bandwidth, implementing a long-term plan, and improving the election, training, and support model.

Implementing this recommendation would support the access and expansion of course offerings which are beneficial to schools and students. Rural schools would be able to expand access to rigorous AP and dual credit course work, and House Bill 5 opportunities for Career and Technical Education courses by filling hard-to-staff subject areas without the need to hire additional personnel and bearing additional costs. It would also provide rural students the opportunity to access and pursue additional content they need to compete for jobs and entrance into higher education institutions.

Making TxVSN and other provider offerings more economical for small districts could level the playing field for rural students. For instance, the cost per course for TxVSN is more expensive than the cost of similar services offered by other third-party providers. This discourages the use of TxVSN. Similarly, there is an inverse cost incentive where districts pay more per course if the student passes the course, and less if the student fails the course. Based on financials alone, this incentivizes failure.

Additionally, the funding structure for TxVSN restricts the amount of ADA funding a district receives for a student participating in TxVSN courses. Texas Education Code 30A.151-155 states that school districts can receive some ADA funding for a student enrolled in a TxVSN online course if the student is enrolled in three or fewer electronic courses during a school year or if the student is enrolled in a full-time online program. Districts do not receive ADA funding if the student is enrolled in more than three online courses in a school year and/or are not full-time online students. Additionally, districts are responsible for paying the TxVSN course fee for each course a student takes up to three courses. In some cases, course fees can be transferred to the student. Regardless, the restrictions on receiving ADA funding and paying fees for TxVSN courses take money away from an already tight rural district budget.

Grants and Contracts



Grants and Contracts – Recommendation 9

Streamline the process for grant application and reviewing documentation by implementing a one-of-eligibility (3-month calendar), e-rolling data, and designating a central age of compliance and find better solutions for rural and small schools.

Superintendents in small rural districts often play a number of roles. Like any district, the superintendent must manage the district finances, human resources, instructional support, and transportation, but a rural superintendent may more often times than not find himself or herself driving a bus route, distributing breakfast or lunch, or teaching classes when there is

Rural Support in General





Rural Support in General – Recommendation 12

Create a network to share best practices among rural school districts to help lead of innovation and achievement.

In addition to the #IAmTXEd campaign described above, the RSTF proposes that the TEA look for additional ways to support the sharing of best practices among rural districts. Media campaigns, newsletters, eBlasts, or other communication vehicles might be employed. The Regional Education Service Centers can play a role by providing opportunities to share promising practices by convening superintendents from their regions or across regions in meetings other than those for policy briefings or administrative issues. Associations dedicated to supporting rural schools can also design avenues for sharing ideas.

Conclusion

The RSTF trusts that the TEA will consider and implement recommendations offered in this report. These RSTF recommendations provide the most leverage for addressing the pressing needs and issues faced in rural schools and communities. To promote collaboration and progress on these recommendations, the RSTF requests that there be a six-month follow up on all recommendations.

Appendix A: Task Force and Regional Forum Meetings

Selection of Task Force Members:

The Rural Schools Task Force was formed intentionally with diversity as a foundation. Nominations and selection were prioritized based on indicators of district academic achievement, indicators of cost-effective operations, size of school district, and ethnicity and gender of the superintendent. Twenty (20) superintendents from across the state, one from each ESC region, were selected.

Selection of Initial Issues to Study

Prior to the meeting of the Task Force, a superintendent survey disseminated through ESC directors asked superintendents to rank the issues most important in their school district. The issues included: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5, use of technology, 300 square mile rule, partnerships to leverage resources, ASATR, leadership pipelines, family and community engagement, and "other." There were 430 survey respondents. The top 3 issues noted as important to rural schools and district were teacher recruitment, teacher retention, and House Bill 5.

The Task Force and Regional Forum Meetings:

There were four (4) Task Force meetings and seven (7) regional forums that took place over six months. Each meeting and regional forum was planned by a team consisting of staff from Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC). Four ESC directors served as unofficial advisors to the planning team. Each meeting focused on specific objectives and was designed with interactive, hands-on activities to meet meeting outcomes.

October 2016: Task Force Meeting 1 focused on orienting the Task Force to their charge and narrowing and prioritizing topic areas important to rural schools and districts. Task Force members reviewed the results from the superintendent survey, expanded on the issues related to the survey topic areas, and engaged in a consensus building process to narrow and prioritize which topics the Task Force would address. The Task Force prioritized teacher recruitment and retention to be their focus.

Between meetings 1 and 2, Task Force members were encouraged to engage other stakeholders in the conversation – in this case, students. Task Force members conducted informal focus groups with their middle school and/or high school students to explore student's perceptions of the

rural schools and districts face regarding teacher recruitment and retention. The Task Force produced a preliminary list of the primary obstacles and possible ideas related to teacher recruitment and retention.

Task Force members recognized that the remaining topics were also important and made a collective decision to engage their superintendent colleagues from across the state to provide input on the obstacles, promising practices, and potential ideas for the remaining topics.

Between meetings 2 and 3, Task Force members conducted surveys and focus groups with their teachers concerning teacher retention. Teachers were asked several questions regarding the reasons why they have stayed in the district, why some of their colleagues have left, and what the district could do to ensure teachers stayed in the district. Task Force findings were shared during the third Task Force meeting.

January and February 2017 Rural Schools Regional Forums

To ensure statewide superintendent engagement, TEA conducted seven (7) rural regional forums across the state. Forums were held in Abilene, Waco, Corpus Christi, Kilgore, Van Horn, Uvalde, and Lubbock. There were approximately 300 participants across all seven forums.

Topics discussed during the forum included: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5, leadership pipelines and support, use of technology, partnerships to leverage resources and

Appendix B: Rural School Task Force Promising Practices

Introduction

As part of the process of developing recommendations for meeting the needs of rural districts, seven regional forums were held across the state in the winter of 2017, in addition to meetings of the Rural Schools Task Force. As part of the meetings and forums, promising practices for addressing the challenges identified by the Rural Schools Task Force and other challenges identified by participants at the forum were collected. Those ideas are presented in this appendix. TEA, in conjunction with the Texas Comprehensive Center, will also be releasing four Rural Spotlight Case Studies later this summer to highlight successful practices by Texas rural schools.

Recruitment and Retention Grow Your Own

“Grow Your Own” programs were suggested as one promising practice for teacher recruitment. Rather than recruiting from outside the district, this practice calls for developing teachers in the community. Two approaches were suggested. The first is recruiting high school students. The second is recruiting paraprofessionals to acquire teacher certifications.

To encourage high school students to become teachers, participants suggested:

- Developing and promoting education exploration classes in high school whereby high school students could serve as teaching aides, peer tutors, or assisting coaches with their responsibilities. This early exposure to interacting with others students can help prospective educators see the many benefits of the teaching profession.
- _____

prospective teachers. These advantages include smaller class sizes, flexibility in scheduling, and fewer discipline issues. The smaller size of the school and district make building relationships with

Increasing the number of certifications held by a teacher was a strategy used by some districts. The district then pays the teacher for obtaining these additional certifications as well as providing stipends to teachers in subjects such as math, science, or CTE or for living in the district. One district pays teachers a stipend for multiple class or course preparations. Another district suggested asking all secondary teachers to obtain CTE certification.

Childcare Opportunities

For teachers who have children, some districts provide daycare services or afterschool care. Districts may also provide flexibility in teachers' schedules to allow them to attend performances or competitions in which their own children are participating.

Transportation

Because rural communities often do not have housing and teachers may have to reside in a different or larger community, some districts offer transportation (e.g., vans) to bring teachers into the community.

Another strategy related to transportation is to allow teachers who are licensed as bus drivers to drive the buses from their place of residence to reduce both time and travel for those teachers.

Leadership for Creating a Supportive Climate

Leadership was cited as a key element of retaining teachers. Specific leadership strategies included being visible for staff and students, and supporting relationship building to instill an atmosphere of "being a family." This and other practices contribute to the development of a supportive climate.

Strategies for making teachers feel that they are valued beyond monetary benefits are crucial according to the forum participants and Task Force members. Some of these strategies include teacher participation in creating solutions to addressing challenges in the district, teacher input on the school calendar, and recognizing teachers' work publicly through newspaper articles or asking them to present to the school board.

Other practices suggested were bond initiatives for new facilities or maintaining the quality of current facilities, the superintendent and principal(s) serving in the role of advocate for teachers with parents and community members, and implementing a leadership academy for those interested in being a teacher leader, principal, or administrator

House Bill 5

Responding to House Bill 5 provides a challenge to rural districts. Providing courses to allow students to pursue the endorsements set out in House Bill requires additional teachers who are certified to teach CTE courses. Strategies some districts are piloting include partnerships or cooperatives with other districts to share teachers or CTE director. One district created a

programs for students broadens the students' experiences and helps them understand the culture of higher education.

Partnerships with Technology

Technology offers a number of ways to partner with others, both as a tool and as a vehicle to bring people together. One district reported their participation in a 1:1 device program in partnership with Apple. Dual credit programs may be offered on-line in partnership with other school districts, TxVSN, or higher education. Districts may partner with regional education service centers that offer summer technology camps for both teachers and students.

Partnerships with Business and Community

Partnering with business and community is two faceted. Districts may ask for support from community organizations or local businesses. Districts may also provide support for businesses in the community.

Connecting teachers via social networks for opportunities to collaborate outside the district and encouraging peer-to-peer teaching are additional strategies for building teachers skills for integrating technology in the classroom.

The superintendent can host virtual staff meetings or offer grant opportunities for teachers to allow them to ask for particular technologies and explain how these will be used in the classroom. Providing technical support or technology coaches to support use of technology is another means the district can employ. Some districts ask students to serve as technology coaches for teachers.

Support for Students

Technology was suggested as a tool for improving learning opportunities for students. Blended learning, where teachers facilitate courses that include online and face-to-face components, were cited as a way to offer additional courses for students. Flipped classrooms, a form of blended learning, allows students to use technology to access the presentation of content from home so that class time at school may be used for practice or project based learning using that content. Blended classes and fully online courses may be strategies for credit recovery, to reduce scheduling issues, and to offer AP and advanced courses. Finally, districts can support students by providing wireless access to the Internet on school buses so that students can work on assignments while riding the bus the long distances they often have to travel in rural areas.

Support for the Community

Two suggested strategies rural districts can use to support the use of technology outside the school buildings include offering community wide wireless access and capturing district events (programs, games, assemblies) and posting or streaming those for parents and community members to view.

Family and Community Engagement

Although rural communities are typically close knit, family and community engagement in the activities of the school may not be as strong as the rural district would hope. Suggested practices for improving family and community engagement included providing meals and childcare at parent meetings. An interpreter should be provided for all meetings with parents whose spoken language is other than English. Scheduling parent conferences at convenient times for parents was another strategy suggested.

Communicating in multiple ways and in the right form was recommended. The goal of communication is to improve the accuracy of information about the district across the community. Promoting the positive aspects and celebrating successes help encourage parents and the community to engage with education. Academic showcases are one strategy for celebrating success. Offering special events such as senior citizen lunches,

veteran day celebrations, or grandparents' lunch may provide an opportunity to share positive news about the district that can be broadly shared in the community.

Meet Them Where They Are was suggested as a way to increase family and community engagement. Districts can schedule parent events in conjunction with ballgames, student programs, and pep-rallies or schedule elementary student activities during halftime of high school football games. Educators can attend community gatherings and civic meetings to keep parents and the community informed. Finally, technology tools were another vehicle recommended for communicating with parents and the community. Some forum participants recommended a weekly phone call to parents or the use of Facebook and other social media to communicate broadly with a range of audiences.

Beyond sharing information, listening to parents was cited as a critical element of strong two-way communication. Participants at the regional forums suggested conducting parent and community surveys or hosting focus groups to collect parents' ideas and perceptions. These methods can also help identify factors that keep people disengaged. One district held a "Did You Know" Town Hall event for members of the community to familiarize the public with the exciting initiatives the district was offering. The response was overwhelmingly positive and many of those in attendance shared that they had no idea of all the offerings the school district had in place to serve its students.