



WHITE PAPER

# Rooted in Place: Responsive Rural Education Technical Assistance



By Dr. Caitlin Howley

## Abstract

*Rural sociologist Daryl Hobbs once quipped, “If you’ve seen one rural community, you’ve seen one rural community.”<sup>1</sup> His pithy observation speaks to the complexity and diversity of rural communities, traits that are often overlooked in popular conceptions of country life. However, the geographic, demographic, and economic dynamics of rural communities in the United States can vary widely, making logging communities in the Pacific Northwest quite different from farming communities in the Great Plains, which in turn are unlike border towns in New Mexico or coal towns in Appalachia.*

Nonetheless, rural places share a number of characteristics that distinguish them from non-rural places—traits that have important implications for those who provide technical assistance to educators in rural schools and districts. These qualities include, not surprisingly, small populations, distance from urban centers, and lack of scale. Equally as significant are social dynamics arising from the need of local residents to interact constructively over time for the benefit of their families and community.

## Implications of Rurality for Technical Assistance

To ensure that their efforts to enhance the capacities of rural schools and districts are effective, technical assistance providers should understand and accommodate the particularities of rurality. First among these is a constraint that many, but not all, rural districts confront. Serving areas smaller, more sparsely populated, and often poorer than urban or suburban districts, rural districts must conduct all the work of educating their students, implementing new initiatives, and complying with state and federal policies that other districts must—but with fewer resources. As a result, rural teachers and administrators frequently undertake roles and responsibilities in addition to those they already have.<sup>2</sup> For instance, a rural principal may also teach, drive a school bus, and serve as the district grant writer. Already overcommitted and likely stressed, rural teachers

and leaders may find implementing new programs or change efforts to be very difficult.

A second and related constraint is that rural districts and schools often lack sufficient resources for high-quality technical assistance and professional development. In a terrible irony, the poorest, most challenged rural districts—those most in need of additional support—are often those least able to afford it.<sup>3</sup>

Educators in rural districts and schools also face professional isolation.<sup>4</sup> One teacher may serve as the sole science faculty member in a small, rural high school, without easy access to colleagues teaching a similar curriculum or confronting similar issues. Lack of professional networks can lead to high rates of job dissatisfaction and attrition, compounding the recruitment and retention difficulties many rural districts already face.<sup>5</sup>

Technical assistance providers should also attend to characteristics stemming from the social dynamics prevalent in rural areas, which tend to be informal, non-confrontational, and group-oriented rather than individualistic. Such dynamics are an important part of country life, enabling the multiplex relationships characteristic of rural communities and making local civic efforts possible. Social and professional lives overlap in rural communities such that teachers may attend the same church as their students and administrators, who are neighbors and



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sometimes relatives. However, rural informality and social proximity make technical assistance strategies based on critique (such as lesson studies or critical friend processes) far less effective than they might be in other locales.<sup>6</sup>

Those who assist rural schools and districts should also be aware that many rural communities value tradition.<sup>7</sup> Intergenerational relationships, continuity of land ownership, commitments to land stewardship, and enduring local norms all contribute to this characteristic of rural life. As a result, rural people may be averse to change, suspicious of innovation, and leery of those from outside the community who bring new and different ideas or ways of doing things. Similarly, rural residents may be skeptical about cosmopolitan trends and values, such as modernization, a national or global focus, mobility (both social and geographic), or concern with self-presentation. Because such perspectives are what enable rural people to interact and nurture their communities collectively, technical assistance may be more effective if it engages rather than ignores or subverts them.

Despite the characteristic cohesion of many rural communities, technical assistance providers will also find that they are not free from social division and inequity. Local elites often dominate rural politics, protecting their own interests and ensuring that minorities or poor people remain disempowered.<sup>8</sup> Education can be a particularly contested area, with competing views of local educational goals and interests sometimes leading to power struggles and community fragmentation.<sup>9</sup> Given the centrality of schools to rural social and community life, the success of technical assistance may hinge on an understanding of local micropolitics.

### Responsive Rural Technical Assistance

Next are several principles for providing assistance that is responsive to the particularities of rural schools and districts. These are necessarily tentative and emergent, given the changing contexts of education and contemporary rural life as well as the paucity of research on what might make rural technical assistance effective.

Nonetheless, such principles enable us to consider how we might better tailor services to those who teach the 20 percent of our nation's students who are enrolled in rural schools.<sup>10</sup>

**Engage Rural Distinctiveness.** Although it has become a truism that rural and urban educators face similar challenges, such as those posed by impoverished students or lack of adequate funding, rural places differ from non-rural locales in significant ways that can enhance or undermine the success of technical assistance. For instance, a hallmark of responsive rural assistance is how it embraces the characteristic ways rural people interact and work together; initiatives grounded in collaboration rather than critique may be received more warmly by rural educators accustomed to cooperation and non-confrontation. Similarly, providers should ensure that the interventions they assist rural schools and districts to implement are well aligned with local goals and values, reflecting the interests of multiple community constituencies.

**Accommodate Constraints.** Rural responsiveness also includes sensitivity to the constraints of rural districts. For example, a responsive technical assistance provider would not request that the superintendent of a small, remote district refer student achievement data analysis questions to her director of research; due to resource constraints, rural district offices are unlikely to employ such an individual, instead assigning duties to existing staff. A responsive provider, on the other hand, might help a rural superintendent determine what analyses are needed for what purposes; provide training and a user-friendly guidance document on accessing data and conducting desired analyses so that the logistics of future analyses are clear; and identify sources of technical and analytic support for future questions.

**Offer Opportunities for Connection.** Ongoing collegial support is a vital resource for teachers and administrators, but in many rural and remote places, such networks may be limited by geographic isolation or the lack of peers in similar positions. Technical assistance that is sensitive to this circumstance would likely include strategies



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for helping rural educators connect with others. Online communities of practice, regional meetings, and virtual study groups are just a few of the mechanisms by which new collegial relationships could be facilitated. However, technical assistance providers should also be aware that some rural areas still lack access to high-speed broadband<sup>11</sup> and may be unable to take advantage of bandwidth-intensive opportunities such as videoconferencing.

**Enlist Rural Strengths.** A savvy technical assistance provider will also recognize that rurality offers a number of advantages. New initiatives can be implemented quickly in small schools and districts, for instance, and rural institutions are capable of fashioning creative approaches to their challenges by virtue of necessity.<sup>12</sup> Strong school-community relationships and family engagement<sup>13</sup> means that a variety of resources and perspectives can be brought to bear on educational change efforts.

**Link Assistance to Place.** Rural places themselves offer ample opportunities around which to focus instructional and curricular initiatives. One example is place-based learning, a variant of project-based learning rooted in a local area, which focuses on the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art relevant to the communities that schools serve. Communities provide the context for learning, students focus on content reflecting community needs and interests, and community members participate as local resources and partners.<sup>14</sup> Place-based learning can be used to (1) make instruction more relevant to students' lives, (2) support curriculum standards, (3) leverage community resources when financial resources are limited, and (4) encourage strong school-community relationships.<sup>15</sup>

Responsiveness to rurality in technical assistance, then, includes several components: an understanding of the characteristic social dynamics of rural places, insight into the constraints associated with rurality, and an appreciation for local strengths. Perhaps even more important, however, is the informed

translation of such knowledge into practice, including engaging local practices and norms; using assistance strategies that accommodate—or, better yet, ameliorate—local constraints; and helping schools, districts, and communities use their strengths to find their own solutions.





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Caitlin Howley has nearly 20 years of experience leading education research and program evaluation studies and providing technical assistance to educators. Located in ICF's Charleston, West Virginia office, she serves as associate director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC) and conducts research for the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Mid-Atlantic and K-12 and college programs for at-risk student populations across the Appalachian region. Dr. Howley also provides technical assistance to education leaders and practitioners via the Reform Support Network. In earlier capacities, Howley directed evaluation for the Appalachia Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education, provided evaluation services to the Region IV Comprehensive Center, and served as a Research and Evaluation Specialist with the Appalachia Regional Education Laboratory.

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