Characteristics of Effective Rural Elementary Schools for Students with Disabilities

Katherine M. Nagle, Glenda Hernandez, Sandra Embler, Margaret J. McLaughlin & Frances Doh

University of Maryland

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Abstract

While 25 to 30 percent of U.S. children attend schools in rural areas, there is little research into how teachers in these schools are responding to the challenges of including students with disabilities in standards-based reform. In response to this concern, we identified 13 high-poverty, high-performing rural elementary schools in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania that were also effective for students with disabilities. We conducted classroom observations and in-depth interviews. Our analyses of these data revealed four school-level characteristics of effective, low-income rural elementary schools. Finally, we present recommendations that principals and school improvement teams at the elementary level can use to better understand how to engage in continuous improvement of special education services.

Accountability Reform and Rural Schools

Approximately 65% of rural schools receive Title I funds. On average, rural schools and districts have fewer students than non-rural schools and districts; are more likely to be geographically isolated, and may, for example, be located in mountainous areas and on small islands. In addition, rural districts may be surrounded by difficult terrain, few roads, and may have extreme weather conditions. Rural districts also tend to comprise smaller number of schools than urban or suburban districts and also face declining student enrollments, which could result in staff reductions and school closures.

In a recent study conducted in response to Congressional concerns relating to the implementation of NCLB in rural schools, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) found that rural districts faced “Some challenges in meeting NCLB provisions to a greater extent than non-rural districts” (GAO, 2004, p.2). Rural districts reported problems related to:

- Meeting NCLB student proficiency goals and in particular meeting the needs of economically disadvantaged students who live in communities that lack resources such as libraries and computers;
- Recruiting, retaining and training highly qualified educators. This is difficult in small and rural schools and districts due to their geographic isolation, lower salaries, and lack of spousal employment.

In this paper we present the findings of a five-year research study to identify the characteristics of rural elementary schools that are achieving better than expected results for students with disabilities on state assessments. In addition, we present recommendations for incorporating these characteristics into school improvement planning.
• Meeting additional expenditures associated with NCLB assessment requirements including the cost of administering assessments, collecting and analyzing assessment results, and reporting the results of assessments to parents and the community. In addition, rural districts reported a shortage of staff with technical expertise required to develop reports on student progress.

However, like their urban and suburban counterparts, rural schools and districts reported challenges relating specifically to students with disabilities. For example, about half both rural and non-rural districts attributed problems to meeting proficiency targets for large enrollments of students with disabilities. In particular, the impact of the performance of small subgroups on the overall performance of classrooms or a school with small enrollments was of considerable concern (Kane & Staiger, 2001). Rural schools also reported that this population required extra and frequently expensive services and academic assistance, such as after-school enrichment and tutoring to help them achieve proficiency and many needed accommodations on standardized testing that stretched the resources of the district. An additional concern is that most small rural schools and even districts will not have enough students with disabilities to be considered a group for federal AYP accountability purposes, and some may not even have sufficient numbers to meet the reporting “n” (McLaughlin, Embler, Hernandez, & Caron, 2005).

This remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. In the first section we present a brief description of the methodological approach adopted in this study, including measurement tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. In the second section we identify school level characteristics common across participating rural elementary schools that emerged from the data corpus. In the third and final section we will present our recommendations for integrating special education indicators that measure progress toward the identified characteristics into a school-level improvement plan.

Methodology

This study involved the use of a cross-case research design involving multiple study sites in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The school selection process was a multi-step procedure. We began the process by first identifying those elementary schools in each specific state classified in the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) as rural. For Maryland and Delaware, rural districts were identified and all elementary schools within those districts were included in the sample. In Pennsylvania, using the build a table feature in the CCD, a list of all rural elementary schools in the state was generated.

From these lists of rural elementary schools we then selected only those elementary schools with grade levels participating in the state assessments. In Maryland and Delaware this included schools with a 3rd and/or 5th grade, while in Pennsylvania it was comprised of schools with a 5th grade. This resulted in a sample of 54 elementary schools in Maryland, 16 elementary schools in Delaware, and 175 elementary schools in Pennsylvania. For these schools as well as the state, we then gathered all publicly available demographic, performance, and participation data. When the study began, performance data was measured by the Maryland School Performance and Assessment Program (MSPAP), the Delaware State Testing Program (DSTP) and the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). However, in 2002 Maryland adopted the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) in response to NCLB requirements.

To select high poverty and high performing elementary schools to study further, we first narrowed our sample to those schools above the state average in poverty. Poverty was measured by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced meals (FARMs) in Maryland and Delaware, and the percent of students reported as low-income in Pennsylvania.

From the selected elementary schools, we then identified up to six schools in each state that performed above the state and district average on state assessments for all students and for students with disabilities. In Maryland and Pennsylvania, schools were rated according to the percent of academic performance indicators in which they were above the state and district averages. Academic indicators in Maryland included state assessments scores in reading, writing, language arts, and mathematics while in Pennsylvania academic indicators included mathematics and reading. However, in selecting high-performing schools in Delaware, schools were chosen based on their overall performance rating calculated by the state, which was a weighted combination of reading, writing, and mathematics scores on state assessments. While an attempt was made to make performance over time a criterion for selection, trends were not stable enough to support this method of elementary school selection. The final selection of elementary schools resulted in six schools in Maryland, four in Delaware, and four in Pennsylvania. One school in Pennsylvania chose not to participate, reducing the number of schools in Pennsylvania to three (See Table 1 for demographic information).

The majority of schools we visited in Maryland and Delaware had relatively high percentages of students in special education (see Table 2). Two schools selected in these states had centers for students with more significant cognitive disabilities, one school housed a program for students who were deaf or hard of hearing, and another housed the district’s Autism program. In the other schools we observed students with a range of disabling conditions varying from mild to moderate in severity. Similar to the national picture a majority of
students in special education were learning disabled and had problems with reading. The schools we visited in Pennsylvania had special education percentages around the national average.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Students in Special Education at the School Level</th>
<th>Delaware</th>
<th>Maryland</th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within each elementary school we utilized two methods of data collection: classroom observations and in-depth interviews. Classroom observations were recorded on an observation form that had been used in the Beacons of Excellence Project and included information relating to the physical arrangement of the classroom, the structure of the lesson and type of instructional materials, the level of teacher and student interaction, and the nature of accommodations and modifications evident in the classroom (OSEP Topical Brief, 2002).

We visited the selected elementary schools during winter 2002-03 and fall 2003. Interviews were conducted with the school principal and at least one general and one special education teacher, both of whom had been in their current positions for over two years. The school principal decided which teachers we would be able to interview. Interviews followed a protocol and were taped with consent of the participant. Each interview lasted one to two hours. Interviews and classroom observations were conducted by multiple researchers (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988), allowing the researchers to overlap data analysis and data collection, as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as well as Van Maanen (1988). The use of multiple investigators provided complementary insights, added richness to the data analysis, and enhanced confidence in the findings (Eisenhardt, 2002).

For qualitative data collected from interviews and site observations we adopted Erickson’s modified analytic induction method (Erickson, 1986) to identify significant patterns and construct a thematic framework. Four researchers were involved in the qualitative data analysis, which began at the individual case study with the school as the unit of analysis. Each case analysis consisted of all the information collected on each school: interview data, observation data, and school policies. Each researcher wrote a case record to pull together and organize the large amounts of data collected topically. Within each case record data were coded by individual researchers using categories that emerged from the data and keeping as close as possible to the terms used by the participants themselves. The results of the coding in each case were compared and discussed in a form of analytical triangulation (Patton, 1990). LSS researchers followed the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994) for check-coding. Two researchers separately coded the first eight pages of the interviews from the first school visited in each state and reviewed the coded sections together. Intercoder reliability was determined using the following formula:

\[
\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{total number of agreements} + \text{disagreements}}.
\]

Initial intercoder reliability at each level ranged from 74 to 80 percent and rose up to between 90 and 93 percent after the differences were clarified. A further check was performed two thirds of the way through the data analysis on one school interview selected at random.

We then conducted cross case analysis by analyzing different perspectives on central issues, grouping together answers from different people to common questions, and comparing data from site observations to create a descriptive cross case analytic framework. The following decision rules were applied as themes were
identified: First a theme was coded as present for a participant if it was mentioned repeatedly or with strong emphasis during the interview and second, a theme was coded as present for a study site if it was mentioned by two or more participants.

Findings: Characteristics of Effective Low Income Rural Elementary Schools

In this section we present the findings from our cross-case analysis of the educational and organizational characteristics of rural elementary schools that are effective for students with disabilities. Our analysis revealed the following four school-level characteristics: a) Emphasis on high standards for student performance and behavior and access to the general education curriculum; b) stability within the school community and a willingness to work together; c) close ties between the school, parents, and the community; and d) flexible school instructional arrangements, creative use of resources, and support for at risk students.

Emphasis on high standards for student performance and behavior and access to the general education curriculum

Teachers and administrators reported that they held high expectations for all students including those with disabilities and that for the most part they were included in the general education classroom and expected to cover the same curriculum as other students. One principal explained that the school provides prizes for attendance, participation, and achievement. In another elementary school the teachers explained that even teachers in pre-k classes prepare for the state assessment program by working on activities that will support those assessed in the later grades. In another school teachers reported that students are happy and safe and always come to school ready to learn and do their best. In several schools staff pointed out that in addition to the high expectations of teachers for all students, the students had very high expectations for themselves because they knew that the schools they attended had excellent assessment scores and they did not want to let the school down.

Very surprisingly, only one elementary school principal voiced concerns about meeting NCLB AYP requirements. This respondent predicted that the school would be failing in the following year because of the poor performance of students in special education and students receiving Title 1 services. However, the principal did not believe that parents or the close knit community would be too concerned as the desire for high academic standards in education was not very high. According to the principal most parents think that if it was "good enough" for them, it is good enough for their children. Even the brighter students who receive scholarships often attended trade school and not college.

Teachers and principals also reported that there were very few discipline or behavior problems within their schools and that the overall school climate was conducive to learning. For example, one principal reported that out of the three suspensions they had last year in the school, two were for the same student. About 75 percent of schools reported that they had some kind of code of conduct or character programs that contributed to the positive school climate by reinforcing respectful behavior. Teachers in several schools explained that behavior policies are set by the teachers and are consistently applied so that everyone has buy in and the students know what is expected of them and what the consequences of poor behavior will be. To address behavior problems in one school the family crisis therapist created a Gentlemen’s Club for 4th and 5th grade boys and a Ladies Club for 4th and 5th grade girls. There were set criteria for entrance and for continued enrollment. Members earned outside activities if they behaved appropriately and the clubs had guest speakers and social activities. In another school informants described a program called STARS (Students At Risk), which was a county wide, interagency program with the Department of Mental Health that focused on prevention, response to and consequence of poor behaviors. Staff included the special education teacher, pupil personnel teacher, behavior support teacher, and the school psychologist. The STARS program was designed for students with a range of challenging behaviors.

Several of these programs were after-school activities targeted toward more at-risk populations and consisted of rewards for good behavior and weekly activities if students completed homework or avoided conflict with others. A number of these programs were county or district wide and were created through inter-agency collaboration. For example, staff in one school described a county wide program called Beyond the Bell which was funded by a grant. A coordinator and an instructional assistant remained in the school until 5:00 p.m. to help students with academics, but also to “bond to the school” through activities such as woodworking, arts, trips, and clubs such as Taekwondo and Spanish classes provided by community members. Parks and Recreation Department personnel stay until 6:00 p.m. and there is free bus transportation home for students who need it.

In terms of access to the curriculum, a variety of placements or instructional arrangements were utilized. In the larger rural elementary schools center programs, self-contained programs and resource rooms were available. In the smaller rural elementary schools students with disabilities were in regular classes all the time because the school did not have a special education teacher all the time. In terms of instructional arrangements, some schools separated students into different ability groups for reading and mathematics, while in others, usually very small schools, all students were educated together and were taught the same curriculum. In several of the small rural schools regular...
education teachers had limited access to special education teachers and had to make the required instructional accommodations themselves. Teachers from several small rural schools explained that all students with IEPs were included in the regular education classroom because there was only one special education teacher for the whole school.

In one elementary school teachers reported that they could choose from three district approved curricula that were aligned with the state content standards and had a scope and sequence. However, the staff reported that they could not use teacher-developed curricula. Teachers from another school reported that all students used Math Trailblazers because it included writing and higher-order thinking skills. The teachers in this school emphasized that students in special education also received additional help, but that a major tenet of the school was that students with disabilities should have exposure to the regular curriculum whenever possible. The only exception to this was students with significant cognitive disabilities who were frequently taught a more functional curriculum. For example, two elementary schools had an intensive learning center (ILC), which was a self-contained program for students with more severe disabilities. The students received instruction in functional academics with little reference to the general grade level curriculum.

**Stability within the school community and a willingness to work together**

There was a high level of staff and student stability in all the elementary schools we visited. For example, all but one principal had been in his or her current school for over five years, with several having worked in the same elementary school for over 20 years. A similar level of stability existed within the teaching staff, with very few vacancies opening up at the school level. In all the schools we visited, staff and principals said that they had very few vacancies and the ones they did have were from retirements. In one school the principal said that very occasionally they may lose two or three young teachers because they want to go to areas where there is more to do socially. However, the principal commented that they had no trouble getting new teachers because the district had such a good reputation. Another principal described how she had hired six new teachers when she arrived at the school and that candidates were lined up outside the school. Interestingly, even when a rare vacancy occurred, the principals reported that they had no difficulty filling the position because of the high reputation of their school. Schools also reported that there was no difficulty filling instructional aide positions. One school reported that they had received 60 applications for one instructional aide position.

Many of the teachers and principals we spoke with commented that the high level of stability and continuity in staffing was a great strength of their school, as it helped develop a feeling of responsibility and accountability for all students, as many of the teachers had either been students in the school themselves or had taught the parents of the current students. One teacher explained that all the teachers know all the students and keep an eye on them so that no child falls through the cracks. This high level of stability was noted as a particular strength in the small rural schools and several teachers told us that when staff left it was very painful to them personally because it was like losing a family member. Teachers in three small elementary schools said that they lived in fear of being closed down because of their low enrollments. The teachers in one of these three schools explained that the district had already tried once to close the school, but that the community had been in an uproar. In another school several teachers commented that everyone looked out for everyone else and that they jumped in and supported each other all the time. The principal of this school reported that there was a school improvement meeting once a month that everyone, even the administrative staff, attended.

Teachers and principals commented that this stability also fostered close relationships between staff and reported high levels of collaboration between regular education teachers and special education teachers as they tried to meet the needs of the students in the school. In several schools grade level teachers shared planning periods and had team meetings once a week. In addition, the principal in one school created *Vertical Teaming Articulation*, which enabled one teacher from each grade to meet weekly to coordinate what students needed to know across the grades. The special education teachers in this school were attached to specific grade spans and attended the weekly meetings too. Although not all schools were able to provide joint planning time due to lack of staff at each grade level, in several small schools teachers reported that they frequently met after school and on weekends and informally planned lessons.

In many of the elementary schools we visited it was clear that the school staff and administration worked well together and that teachers felt like part of a team. In almost half of the schools the teachers set the school improvement goals and in several schools the teachers prepared the budget and the principal then approached the district to get the resources. In most elementary schools, the goals for students in special education were the same or similar to those for the school as a whole. About half the principals we spoke with described the school improvement process as completely data driven. Examples of common goals from school improvements plans related to achievement, technology, staff development, and maintaining a safe and healthy environment.

Most of the principals we spoke with were very involved with special education process within their school and did not regard students in special education as any different from other students. One principal told us that she is the chair at all IEP meetings and simply did not tolerate the idea that these students were somehow
separate from the rest of the school. Several of the principals had backgrounds in special education and were very knowledgeable about the field. Indeed most of the principals attended all IEP meetings and special education teachers reported that they actively participated in the meeting rather than just being present for signing the documents.

Close ties between the school, parents, and the community

Teachers from 11 out of the 13 schools visited reported that they had very high levels of parental involvement in the school. One teacher explained that if a parent called to say that his or her child missed the bus then someone in the school, often the principal or secretary, would drive to the student’s home to get them. In one small school parents helped raise money to build an addition to the school. Teachers also reported that parents volunteered in the classroom to help struggling students and that the school had Saturday evening homework meetings where parents could come to the school, bring a blanket and a picnic and talk with other parents as well as school staff. Teachers in several schools described events for parents such as bingo night, a winter festival and cake decorating contest, a silent auction of gift baskets, and potluck suppers. Several teachers explained that these events were more popular than that PTA meetings and parent conferences as they were more informal and less intimidating to parents. Some teachers also reported that the education level of the parents was fairly low and that support for homework and academics was not always provided at home and that some parents needed help with parenting skills. In contrast teachers in another school said that the emphasis on school accountability had made parents take their children’s schooling seriously.

It is clear that most schools were aware of the impact of poverty on families and especially on the ability of parents to support their child. Parents of students in the rural schools we visited were employed as watermen, blue-collar workers, retail service, farmers, factory workers, low-income wage earners, and lumber workers. The principal in one school explained that although overall parent involvement was very high, some parents who had been recently located into public housing complexes were limited by the lack of public transportation. This is clearly a barrier to parent involvement and a number of principals explained that the district provided free transportation for parents who did not drive themselves as otherwise the lack of public transport would make it difficult for some parents to feel that they were members of the school. Teachers in other elementary schools explained that because many parents worked during the day they held meetings on Saturday mornings, while other teachers said that they made home visits. In another school there was an open-door lunch policy and parents could just drop by and have lunch with their child.

Teachers from most elementary schools also reported that the local communities were very supportive of the school. For example, teachers in one school explained that community organizations such as churches and civic groups provided poorer families with school supplies, food, clothing, and even Christmas presents. Teachers in another school described how they would walk into the hardware store in the local town and if they showed their school ID they did not have to pay for items that were for the school. The local grocery store also donated goods to the school. The principal of this school explained that schools were the central foci of the town and that the school sports teams were the objects of intense interest and community support. In other communities the school building was used by outside organizations for local events and services. For example, a local retirement center uses the school two evenings a week and the public library is open in the school three days a week.

Teachers from several schools reported that members of the local community volunteered in the school to provide one on one reading tutoring for struggling students. In another school three volunteers did not have students in the school and came from another school district because they tried to volunteer in their home school they did not feel welcomed. In the same school a retired teacher volunteered three days a week to do multi sensory interventions for students with reading problems. In other schools the local community and the schools work together to ensure that all children can participate in activities and events.

Support for at risk students and creative use of resources

Teachers and administrators in all the elementary schools we visited reported that they had comprehensive systems in place to support struggling students. For example the teachers and principal in one school described how they had restructured some K-3 classrooms into three “families.” The students and the curriculum in these classes were not divided into traditional grade levels, but allowed to progress at their own rate, remaining with the same teacher for up to three years. One of the “families” has a special education teacher assigned to it who works with all the students. In another school all kindergartners were in a multi-age classroom, with parents of students in first and second grade given the choice of traditional classroom or the multi-age program. In the following year the principal intends to offer a multi-age class for 3rd and 4th grade. The teachers from the multi-age classrooms commented that they felt the program was particularly beneficial for students who entered school already behind their peers, as they were able to learn the basics at their own pace. In addition in one small school all classes except for
Kindergarten were combination classes with 1st and 2nd grade together, 3rd and 4th grade together, and 5th and 6th grade together.

Teachers and principals described several interventions designed to support struggling students. To illustrate, teachers from one school described a district wide reading program involving small group instruction and student testing 4 times each year. The Quality Reading Inventory assessed accuracy and comprehension and any student not on grade level received 45-60 minutes of targeted reading interventions from a reading specialist. The reading program was also extended across the other content areas. Teachers in other schools described similar interventions including Soar to Success and Fast Forward. Several schools had student volunteers from nearby high schools and colleges come in and read with struggling students. In addition several schools had academic programs in the summer that were paid for by the local communities. Other schools had after-school tutoring and one had mandatory summer programs for students in danger of being retained due to poor academic performance. In some schools Title 1 funds were used to provide math resource specialists who taught the subject throughout the school.

The majority of the elementary schools expressed satisfaction with the level of support provided by the districts, but stated that school accountability has increased district pressure to perform well. One school administrator said that although he feels that the district is driven in terms of high expectations and academic performance, the district provides the funds necessary to make it happen. In general, teachers and principals reported that the district staff were approachable and helpful and tried to keep the schools current with changes in policies and requirements. Half of the principals we spoke with reported that the school relied heavily on grant money to provide additional resources. Several schools had grants to support the use of technology in the school and one used grant funds to provide an extended day program. Several of the schools reported that their local district had a grant writing specialist.

The considerable variation in the number of support services available from school to school generally related to the overall size of the school. For example, one school had seven special education teachers and a special education coordinator, a full time counselor, a reading specialist, two writing specialists, a full time home/school coordinator, a school psychologist for two and a half days, and a family crisis therapist. In contrast the principal of one small school we visited was also the principal of four other schools and the school also shared their special education teacher with another school.

Several of the schools also put resources into the emotional needs of their students and families. For example, one principal reported that he used some Title 1 funds to support a Parent Service Provider (PSP) position at the school. The PSP conducted home visits at the request of the nurse or a teacher, helped parents set up doctors’ appointments and transported the child to the clinic, filled prescriptions, adopted a social worker role, organized volunteers, and conducted parent workshops on safety, child abuse, and blood borne pathogens. In another school a family crisis therapist was funded jointly by the district and the Division of Family Services. This individual worked primarily with K-3 parents and students around absenteeism, family trauma, and child abuse. An additional social worker worked with older students on drugs and health issues. Finally in another school the social worker and Title 1 coordinator established a parent program designed to help students be successful by helping parents to become better parents. Workshops and home visits dealt with issues such as academics, prevention and discipline issues. The program also involved the community in collecting school supplies and homework boxes.

In this section we presented our findings on the characteristics of high performing high poverty rural schools that are also effective for students with disabilities. These features related to high standards for student performance and behavior and access to the general education curriculum; stability within the school community and a willingness to work together; close ties between the school, parents, and the community; and support for at risk students and creative use of resources. In the next section we will present a framework for school improvement based on these features.

Recommendations for Incorporating Characteristics of Effective Rural Elementary Schools into the School Improvement Process

In this section we present a set of recommendations that principals and school improvement teams can use to better understand how to engage in continuous improvement of special education services. The recommendations are organized around the characteristics identified above. Reflective questions for the principal or school improvement team to consider are included as an appendix.

Access to the General Education Curriculum, Academic Performance, and Behavior

**Recommendation 1:** Learn as much as you can about the special education population in your school. For example, how many students with disabilities do you have, and what are their disability categories demographic characteristics? Find out where these students are educated and the teachers who are responsible for content instruction. Pay attention to IEP goals and review them for alignment to the general education curriculum, accommodations, and supportive
services. Also become cognizant of the attendance of students in special education and the referral and identification rates for the school and individual classrooms and grades.

**Recommendation 2:** Become knowledgeable about the participation and performance of students with disabilities. How many students with disabilities participated in the state assessments, how did they participate or why didn’t they participate? What are the performance trends of students with disabilities in your school and does performance vary based on teacher, placement or other variables?

**Recommendation 3:** Implement a school-wide behavior policy based on positive intervention strategies for all students and keep track of students with disabilities in terms of suspension rates and expulsion rates. Do any students with disabilities in your school have individual behavior plans and are they known by all school staff to maintain consistent expectations of behaviors?

**Stability and Collaboration**

**Recommendation 1:** For new staff members consider ways to make them feel comfortable when joining a stable and established team. What beginning or new teacher support systems are available in the district? Is it possible to provide a mentor teacher for a short while? How many related service providers, part-time staff or shared staff are present in the school? Are they invited to school functions, such as staff meetings or community events?

**Recommendation 2:** Make sure that IEPs are available to all the educators who work with students with disabilities. Do regular education staff review student IEPs? Do regular education teachers understand what accommodations individual students should receive? Do students with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations during instruction and in assessment situations? How can you promote collective responsibility for all students?

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills to work with students who are diverse learners. Are teachers familiar with different models of collaboration? Does the school day allow special education teachers and regular education teachers to plan together? How can you ensure that they attend professional development activities together?

**Promoting School, Home and Community Relationships**

**Recommendation 1:** Get to know the family background of students with disabilities in your school regardless of whether they are in your attendance area. How many students and their families live outside your attendance area? How can you support their involvement in after-school activities and events? Is there a system of orientation to the school for new families to the area or for the parents of students with disabilities who attend your school for programmatic reasons? Do you have procedures for identifying the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education in your school?

**Recommendation 2:** Develop a clear process to facilitate regular communication between classroom teachers and parents. To what extent do regular education teachers meet with the parents of students with disabilities outside of the IEP process? Do parents of students with disabilities volunteer in their child’s classroom or participate in other volunteer activities? Do they attend grade level “coffee-mornings” with parents of regular education students?

**Recommendation 3:** Make sure that parents of students with disabilities have input and participate in the school improvement process. Is there a way to gauge parent satisfaction with the school climate? How can parents of students with disabilities register their concerns? Are the concerns of parents of students with disabilities addressed promptly? Who investigates complaints from parents of students in special education?

**Recommendation 4:** Utilize community volunteers and organizations to encourage closer ties between the school and the surrounding area. Do events at the schools attract the whole community or just parents? How can you develop positive relationships with local businesses and arrange field trips in the local area that help children appreciate their community?

**School Instructional Arrangements and Supports**

**Recommendation 1:** Become familiar with the special education programs that are offered in your building. Which programs do you have in your building: i.e., Autism, language disabilities, visual impairments, emotional disabilities, or learning and academic disabilities? Which related services providers come to your school? Where are related services provided?

**Recommendation 2:** Participate or at a minimum monitor the general education intervention team in your school to ensure that these do not become part of the process toward an inevitable referral to special education. Do general education teachers collect data on the impact of any interventions they use? Does my staff understands the importance of using scientifically based interventions? Have my staff received professional development and training in research based literacy programs in particular? What professional development opportunities are available to my staff?

**Recommendation 3:** Become familiar with the IEP goals of students with disabilities in your school. How many students with disabilities receive accommodations in instruction or assessment? Is there a tracking system in place to follow the types of accommodations students will need during assessments? How many students have behavioral intervention plans? To what extent are these plans followed by all the school staff?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of high poverty rural schools that are effective for students with disabilities. Although the
challenges of meeting NCLB requirements highlight some of the problems unique to rural schools, the responses of our sample schools indicate that rural schools also possess many positive characteristics that can be harnessed toward improving the education of all students, including those with disabilities.

References


Appendix

Access to the General Education Curriculum, Academic Performance, and Behavior

Reflective Questions

1. How many students in my building have IEPs? What are their ages and grade levels?
2. How many students were referred to special education in my school during last school year and this school year?
3. How many were subsequently found eligible?
4. Do some teachers refer more than other teachers?
5. Where are students who receive special education being educated?
6. Do the IEPs of students in my building reflect general curriculum goals and grade level benchmarks?
7. How many students with IEPs receive instruction from qualified teachers in reading/language arts, math, and/or science in general education classrooms?
8. How many students with IEPs receive their academic instruction solely from special education teachers? Are these teachers considered "highly qualified" to teach this subject matter?
9. How are decisions regarding LRE made?
10. Do general education teachers get to choose whether or not to accept students with IEPs in their classes?
11. How are students who receive special education assigned to general education classes and are they distributed throughout classrooms or are they grouped in certain classes?
12. How many students with disabilities are receiving their subject matter instruction solely in regular classes?
13. How many of my special education students are included in general education only for electives, lunch, or recess, etc.?
14. What is the attendance rate for students receiving special education in my school?
15. Why are my special education students absent?
16. How many are due to suspensions or expulsions? Medical issues? Family issues? Mental health issues? Other issues?
17. Which assessment accommodations were provided to students with IEPs in my building last year?
18. How did my students who receive special education services perform on the state assessments?
19. How many of my students took the alternate assessment? Did all of these students meet the criterion of having a significant cognitive disability?
20. How did students who receive special education services perform on other assessments?
21. What are the suspension and expulsion rates for students with disabilities in my school?
22. Does my school have a school-wide plan for dealing with disruptive students? Does my school have a plan based on positive behavior supports?
23. Does my school have a crisis intervention plan for students who are in behavioral/emotional crisis? Is this plan based on positive behavior supports?

24. Has our staff been trained in positive behavior interventions?

**Stability and Collaboration**

**Reflective Questions**

1. When and how regular education teachers are informed about and receive individual student’s IEPs?
2. How and where are the IEPs for students with special needs maintained? How do general education teachers become aware of a child’s IEP?
3. In my school, do all teachers share responsibility for the performance of students who receive special education?
4. What supports or training are given to my teachers who provided services to students with special needs? What follow-up has been put into place to monitor the implementation and/or effectiveness for students?
5. What models/approaches are general and special education teachers using to support students who receive special education in general education classrooms and environments (e.g., co-teaching models, consultation, other)?
6. Have all of my teachers received professional development related to models for supporting inclusive instruction?

**Promoting School, Home and Community Relationships**

**Reflective Questions**

1. How many special education students are past or current FARMS recipients?
2. Are certain racial/ethnic, SES, age, or other groups of students disproportionately represented in special education in my school?
3. Are my school’s special education students from my attendance area or do they come from other schools in the district?
4. Do students who receive special education services participate in extracurricular activities? How does their participation compare to students in the general population? How many receive transportation services? Are parents aware of the process for requesting after school activity bus transportation?
5. Does my school have specific special education programs that may result in students coming from outside of my attendance zone? Are these students more likely to be from certain racial/ethnic groups or other sub-groups?
6. Does my school have an orientation or transition program in place for new students who are receiving special education services and their families in order to facilitate their adjustment to a new school and make them feel welcome?
7. Do parents of special needs students participate in my school’s activities?
8. Do I have any parents of students with special needs on my School Improvement Team?
9. How is progress toward IEP goals measured and documented, and how is this information transmitted to parents?
10. How are parents and general and special education teachers informed of what accommodations a student needs?
11. Is there a process for parents of students with special needs to communicate with the classroom teachers? Is the process the same as for general education teachers? Is the process working? What evidence do I have that it is working?
12. How do parents and special education teachers rate the climate in my school?
13. How many [complaints, etc.] have I had from parents of students who receive special education in my school? Is there a recurring issue?
14. What channels are available to me that would develop closer ties between my school and the local community?

**School Instructional Arrangements and Supports**

**Reflective Questions**

1. Which special education programs do I have in my building?
2. Which related services are provided to students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in my school?
3. Does my school have the Collaborative Action Process (CAP) or an Educational Management Team (EMT)?
4. What data do we have on its effectiveness in increasing achievement, reducing referrals to special education, and/or reducing problem behaviors?
5. What interventions were tried by general education teachers before referral and were these interventions evaluated?
6. Does my school have IEP goals and/or supports and services in place to address excessive absences?
7. Are students receiving the services as indicated on their IEPs? How do I know?
8. What academic interventions have been put in place to support the achievement of students who receive special education in the general education curriculum?
9. Who ensures that students with disabilities receive the accommodations specified in their IEPs?