


The Role of School-Community Partnerships
in the Academic Success and Postsecondary
Aspirations of Low-Income Students in
Small Rural Schools in Virginia

Doing
More

With
Less



The State Council
of Higher Education for Virginia
(SCHEV), with support from the federal
College Access Challenge Grant Program,
commissioned research to examine the factors that enable and
hinder the academic success and aspirations of low-income students in
small rural school districts in the Commonwealth. The resulting report,
Doing More with Less, identified behaviors, structures,
and perspectives that characterized successful school-community
partnerships that positively impacted student achievement
and postsecondary aspirations in six rural
Virginia school districts.

Rural Virginia Defined

From Appalachian highlands to the coal fields and valleys of southwestern Virginia, along the Crooked Road to the farmlands of southern Virginia, and across the marshes and bays of the Tidewater area and Eastern Shore, rural Virginia is as varied as the land itself.

More than half of Virginia counties or cities are designated as “rural” based on definitions from the Office of Management and Budget and the Economic Research Service Rural-Urban Commuting Areas. Schools located in rural areas serve almost one quarter of Virginia’s students, yet rural students graduate at rates well behind the average on-time state rate (73.2% as compared with 86.6%). Despite the inherent challenges faced by Virginia’s rural schools, their success is essential to reach the Commonwealth’s educational goals.

The work of rural K-12 educators is necessarily supplemented by community organizations and individuals in a wide variety of ways both inside and outside the school setting. Such support, referred to in the report as school-community partnerships, was found to be vital to the success of small rural schools and area students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.


**For more information or to read the full
Doing More with Less report,
visit www.schev.edu/DoingMoreWithLess.pdf.**



Rural can be defined as areas of intensive resource gathering, areas that are non-metropolitan by population, areas where population density is low, and areas where few businesses exist, according to the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission (2001).

What Is a School-Community Partnership?

School-community partnerships in rural Virginia can be understood through four lenses that illuminate the immense differences between partnerships. Each partnership can be plotted across these four sets of elements, providing a framework for analyzing the function of partnerships in a given area.



The first lens is **Types of Partner**, which categorizes partnering groups or institutions by their primary organizational purpose and runs the gamut from business/industry to faith-based groups. The second lens through which to examine a school-community partnership is based on the **Types of Activities** the organization offers, whether that's supporting students' career interests or meeting their basic needs, such as food or clothing. The third lens, **Types of Involvement**, describes the nature of the relationship between the school district and its partner, be it peripheral and short-term or central and frequent. **Type of Focus**, the fourth lens, describes the partnership's target audience. Examples include a family-centered focus where the organization offers social services, basic necessities, or transportation, or a school-centered focus in which the partner provides classroom resources, educational programs, and volunteers.

For guidance about conducting a partnership inventory, reference SCHEV's school-community partnership workbook, a supplement to the full *Doing More with Less* report. It is available online at www.schev.edu/DMWLworkbook.pdf.

"I think it's important that the student sees that the whole community supports the mission of the school, and it's not just the school's mission, it's the community's mission."

– Greenfield school administrator (pseudonym)

Five Roles Filled by School-Community Partnerships

In what ways do community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote college readiness and ambition? Within the rural Virginia case study districts examined in the report, community partners contributed to college readiness and ambition in five ways:

- 1** Support students' academic and future career success indirectly by giving resources, including lab or computer equipment, to schools and directly through in-school or after-school programs and activities, such as tutoring and supplementary learning experiences.
- 2** Offer information on college-going options, assist with application and financial aid forms, such as the FAFSA, and help students to understand college and career options through assessment measures, personal feedback, and other practices that allow students to become aware of personal interests and strengths.
- 3** Facilitate experiences that contribute to college aspirations and socialization to college life, such as college tours and alternative educational experiences, positive adult influences and mentoring, and introductory academic and training experiences on college campuses that build confidence and familiarity with the college setting.
- 4** Perpetuate a formal and informal economy of support that meets tangible student needs (such as school supplies, clothing, and funds for trips and uniforms) and intangible needs (such as individual encouragement to excel and a community environment where messages about the value of educational attainment are echoed and modeled).
- 5** Support a community commitment to the value of postsecondary education that reinforces and augments the goals of the school district. When the whole community moves in a similar direction and focuses resources toward a shared goal, it symbolically shows students that educational achievement is also valued outside of the classroom walls.

Characteristics of Effective School-Community Partnerships

The best school-community partnerships synchronize the knowledge and resources of all parties in ways that improve the content and delivery of their work. Researchers found several features that contribute to better programs, relationships, coordination of resources, and participant perceptions of success. Specifically, the study identified six characteristics of effective partnerships.

Effective school-community partnerships in rural Virginia communities occur when:

- All involved parties contribute from their unique resources and benefit from the resources shared by others. In rural areas, financial and human resources can be scarce. Combining resources can result in more meaningful and efficient program delivery.
- Partners capitalize on local resources to engage students in new learning opportunities. New learning experiences created in conjunction with historic sites, state parks, and theatrical and musical performance venues can engage students who struggle in traditional learning settings.
- Services and activities provide students with new venues where they can build self-efficacy and demonstrate ability.

Faith-based organizations are often places where social influence is passed on through annual recognition and celebration of graduates, through religious mentors who regularly provide accountability for academic performance, and through individuals who directly encourage students to consider postsecondary education.



- Coordinators bring vision, motivation, and unique skill sets to their work, rather than relying only on stock or pre-existing programs. Good hiring practices are important, as is a healthy balance of structured expectations with the freedom to adapt to local circumstances.
- Partnerships are sensitive and responsive to teacher and school needs. Whether through volunteer programs that allow teachers to use adults where they are most needed, or organizations that develop class sessions that reinforce SOL objectives, the best partnerships allow school personnel to communicate what resources are most needed and how they are best used.
- Partners' services and activities meet short-term and long-term objectives, often simultaneously.



Lessons Learned

“We have a high unemployment rate, we have a lot of retirees, and our student population is dropping. So where does that money come from? We just try to make the best we can with what we have and we don’t buy a lot of new stuff. We fix up our old and make it work, and buy the new to supplement.”

– Greenfield school administrator
(pseudonym)

- Schools are stronger because of the variety of community partners. Even seemingly less significant partners are important because they widen the circle of community involvement and offer new avenues for student learning and engagement.
- Coordination and maximization of resources were hallmarks of effective partnerships. Small rural school districts have a limited set of businesses, non-profit organizations, and higher education institutions from which to build partnerships. Although identifying new potential partners might be a first step for schools and communities, imagining ways that existing partnerships could be expanded, focused, or combined was often a more fruitful approach to meeting student needs.
- The way that school-community partnerships work in suburban and metropolitan areas, where policy and best practices are typically established, is not necessarily the way that these arrangements work best in small rural school districts. Though rural partnerships could certainly benefit from deliberate conversations about goals and school objectives, the most intensive and broad-based relationships in the study were a mix of formal roles and informal sharing of resources. To the degree that these networks are sufficiently inclusive rather than territorial, their unstructured, organic, and responsive nature is a strength more than it is a liability.



- Successful schools use their physical resources to draw in the community, generating familiarity, engagement, and support. With careful planning, new or remodeled school structures can meet community needs, such as dining facilities, assembly space, computer labs, libraries, and classrooms that can be used for a variety of special interest groups.
- Successful small rural schools view externally mandated testing as a minimum standard. A commitment to goals that exceed externally imposed standards can express pride and confidence in teachers and students, and exert local control despite increased reliance on external resources.
- Nearby higher education institutions are invaluable resources, providing student teachers, continuing education courses for teachers and administrators, specialized academic camps for students, and postsecondary degree options that are affordable, regionally accessible, and within the scope of imagination for many students. Proximity to a college campus increases the opportunity for students' exposure, thus reducing the perception of college as foreign and intimidating. Community colleges are an especially important resource since they facilitate dual enrollment courses, workforce education, and the Career Coach program.




When all cost-cutting measures had been exhausted and districts were forced to cut staff and course offerings at the secondary level, it was the local community college that intervened by allowing students to dual enroll in existing courses or creating new courses to meet the needs.

Recommendations

The *Doing More with Less* report offers a number of recommendations for schools and community organizations, as well as ideas for those entities to pursue with state policy actors. Specifically, researchers recommend supporting a Community Partnership Coordinator (CPC) position by selecting a local education insider who can serve as an advocate for schools, developing and coordinating partnerships that meet district objectives. Another key recommendation is for districts to perform a school-community partnership inventory to better understand the types and functions of existing partnerships, as well as to highlight areas where aid is uncoordinated or non-existent.

For guidance about conducting an inventory, reference SCHEV's school-community partnership workbook at www.schev.edu/DMWLworkbook.pdf.

Researchers also urge leaders to consider ways to increase involvement of and investment by low-income and minority voices in public life and decision-making. Specifically, they recommend locally based leadership programs, shadowing initiatives, or leadership mentoring opportunities for cross-sections of students and adults who are not part of the dominant racial, gender, and socio-economic status groups. Additionally, since rural school districts face challenges in recruiting new teachers, it is recommended that leaders consider scholarship incentives in return for specified periods of rural service.



For more information, see the Recommendations section of the *Doing More with Less* report, which can be found in its entirety at www.schev.edu/DoingMoreWithLess.pdf. SCHEV's workbook for those interested in conducting a school-community partnership inventory is also available online at www.schev.edu/DMWLworkbook.pdf.

***Doing More with Less* Researchers/Authors:**

Nathan F. Alleman, PhD.

(Baylor University)

L. Neal Holly, PhD.

(West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission)

Project Oversight:

Paula Fisher

(State Council of Higher Education for Virginia)



State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

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