

# Attitude determines student success in rural schools

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## **Study investigates qualities of high-achieving schools**

While most of the country focuses on ACT scores, student-teacher ratio and rigorous curriculum to increase student success, it may be the commitment to excellence that determines student achievement in rural schools. This is an overlooked, yet critical, factor when considering nearly half of American school districts are in rural areas, educating nearly 21 percent of all students.

Perri Applegate, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma K20 Center, recently investigated the qualities that differentiate a high-achieving school and low-achieving rural high school, focusing on high-poverty high schools with at least 51 percent of the population eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Applegate compared the scores on Oklahoma's Academic Performance Index, the state's annual school report of 367 Oklahoma high schools ranging from large, urban to small rural schools. She found no significant difference in achievement of rural schools and those in other settings.

Surprisingly, the top factors that did impact student achievement in urban high schools, ACT scores and dropout rates, did not determine student success in rural schools. Community involvement and the school's commitment to student excellence were the determining factors in whether a rural school was high- or low-achieving.

"In small-town America, the school and the community are dependent upon each other for success," said Applegate. In rural areas, schools tend to be the center of the community, acting as a gathering place and often social services. In larger towns, students have access to resources and support outside of their schools.

"Rural schools in the study listed the same factors as impacting student achievement: poverty, parental support, community, extracurricular activities and a caring school culture," said Applegate. "The difference between a high- or low-achieving rural school was how they -- both the school and the community -- met those challenges."

High-achieving schools had educators that embraced the role of being a rural teacher, which typically means wearing many hats and being creative with necessary resources. The schools had shared and supportive leadership, empowered stakeholders to take leadership roles and did not accept the idea that students were destined to fail based on their address. As one rural teacher pointed out, "Intelligence isn't geographically based."

Other factors included parents and community members who support the teachers, or if necessary, the school enacted programs to increase support. Another key factor was high-achieving schools gave students many opportunities to connect their learning to the well-being of the community, reinforcing the school-community bond.

While affected by the same variables, low-achieving schools felt that being a rural school was a handicap for student achievement and the lack of resources was a burden to school administration and the community. This attitude reflected in the educational approach of the school and in the student's probability to go to college.

According to Applegate, these findings have serious implications beyond

education. Research shows that schools can save communities. The success of one can determine the success or failure of the other.

"We can't assume that student success in all schools, large and small, is impacted by the same issues," said Applegate. "So the question becomes how do we help schools in their environment become successful?"

For rural schools, Applegate suggests preparation programs need to provide specialized training for those who will serve in this setting. Policymakers need to acknowledge that rural schools have particular strengths and weaknesses. Finally, reform programs aimed at improving rural schools need to be tailored to meet their unique needs.

Source: University of Oklahoma

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