

# How States Can Help Rural LEAs Meet the Needs of Special Populations

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All local education agencies (LEAs) struggle to meet the unique needs of special student populations, but providing appropriate services can be especially difficult for those in rural areas. By understanding the rural context, state education agencies (SEAs) can play an important role in helping rural LEAs meet the learning needs of all students.

This chapter highlights common challenges faced by rural LEAs and shares innovative ways SEAs are helping them provide specialized services. The challenges expressed by urban and suburban schools, for example, diverse student populations, limited resources, limited access to qualified staff, are often magnified in rural LEAs, as teachers and administrators attempt to provide specialized services and supports and comply with state and federal regulations.

### UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL LEAS

Special student populations include English Language Learners (ELL), students with disabilities (SWD), and students identified as gifted and talented (G&T). Rural LEAs report three significant challenges in meeting the needs of these students: (1) recruiting, retaining, and professionally supporting teachers to deliver specialized services, (2) meeting the demands of state and federal regulatory requirements, and (3) providing services when resources are limited or unstable.

**Recruiting, retaining, and professionally supporting teachers to deliver specialized services.** Of all the challenges faced by rural LEAs in meeting the needs of special populations, teacher recruitment, retention, and support are among the most significant. Many rural administrators report difficulty in attracting qualified staff to fill special education<sup>1</sup> and ELL<sup>2</sup> positions. While a lower percentage of rural schools have ELL and special education openings compared to suburban and city schools, rural LEAs are much more likely to have difficulty filling these positions, and thus often begin the school year with unfilled positions.<sup>3</sup> In a recent study,<sup>4</sup> more than 50 percent of rural administrators reported moderate to severe challenges in finding teachers qualified to teach SWD.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, rural administrators reported challenges in recruiting teachers qualified to provide specialized services to ELL and G&T students.<sup>6</sup>

With no other choices, many rural LEAs are forced to fill critical positions with teachers who do not meet state and federal requirements. Rural LEAs in states where categorical special education licensing still exists are at an even greater disadvantage. Small enrollment numbers for multiple individual disability categories make it difficult to recruit a single teacher endorsed in multiple areas. Even when rural schools have candidates for positions, these schools tend to hire weaker and less experienced teachers.<sup>7</sup>

Many rural LEA administrators blame low salaries for their difficulty in competing with urban and suburban LEAs to hire and retain trained teachers.<sup>8</sup> Even for those with the resources to offer higher salaries, inflexible state funding

policies can make this difficult. For example, Kentucky uses a common statewide salary schedule and places caps on local district funds through taxation, making it impossible to offer higher salaries to staff with specialized qualifications.<sup>9</sup>

When rural LEAs are successful in recruiting for these positions, data suggest they experience special education attrition rates of 30 percent, with some having 100 percent staff turnover within three years.<sup>10</sup> While some report leaving for higher paying positions,<sup>11</sup> more teachers reported leaving for reasons unique to rural schools,<sup>12</sup> including not being prepared for life in a rural setting,<sup>13</sup> struggles with separation of work and social life, and the demands of the job, coupled with low levels of support and professional isolation.<sup>14</sup>

Face-to-face professional development opportunities might alleviate some of the professional isolation inherent to teaching in rural schools, where it is rare to have other special education teachers with whom to collaborate. However, these resources are often expensive or unavailable locally, requiring teachers to travel, sometimes overnight, to attend face-to-face training. Thirty-two percent of teachers reported unrealistic travel times to attend available professional development sessions, and 33 percent reported challenges covering specialized classes while they were away.<sup>15</sup>

**Meeting the demands of state and federal regulatory requirements.** Because rural teachers and administrators often serve multiple roles and have limited administrative support, their compliance responsibilities can be significant. Some rural ELL teachers report that paperwork significantly impedes instructional time, with one teacher claiming she completes “three hours of paperwork per hour of teaching.”<sup>16</sup> Non-instructional travel and paperwork time may be further increased for teachers serving multiple schools or LEAs, which is common in rural areas. Almost half of rural special populations teachers (43 percent) reported being burdened by a significant amount of non-instructional activities associated with their position.<sup>17</sup> Rural administrators also report spending a significant amount of time completing paperwork.<sup>18</sup>

Paperwork and other non-instructional demands increase when SEAs designate separate funding streams and reporting mechanisms for different programs serving similar purposes and target populations. At times, the accountability and paperwork demands for each project can interfere with the school’s ability to effectively work with students. For example, two projects at a rural northwestern school required a data system, but the LEA was not allowed to use the same data system for both projects. This kind of inflexibility around funding can lead to wasted resources, competing activities, and limited impact on student outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

**Limited local resources and inconsistent funding to support special populations.** While all districts face funding constraints in providing

appropriate services for special populations, rural districts are particularly constrained. Rural districts in many areas have made significant efforts to access local tax dollars to address funding shortages. However, local community support for such activities is decreasing.<sup>20</sup>

While federal mandates prescribe state and local responsibilities with respect to SWD, wide variation exists in how states require LEAs to fund and support ELL<sup>21</sup> and G&T students.<sup>22</sup> Rural districts already struggling to meet federal special education funding requirements often lack the tax base to acquire additional resources and funds for developing innovative programs for other special populations. As a result, special populations like G&T students in rural settings rarely receive instructional programs designed to meet their unique needs.<sup>23</sup>

Inflexible funding streams from federal and state sources and minimum enrollment requirements for services make it difficult to serve often small and fluctuating numbers of special populations. For example, an LEA may find itself with six new ELL students with no immediate funding or resources to provide those services. Low incidences of special populations can also limit access to state programs and funds, especially when SEAs require a minimum number of students in order to qualify.

## STRATEGIES FOR HELPING RURAL LEAS MEET THE NEEDS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS

SEAs can play a vital role in helping their rural LEAs to meet these challenges. The following section provides six recommendations, drawn from research by state and federal agencies, as well as lessons learned from SEAs attempting to implement innovative solutions.

**Support efforts to recruit qualified staff to provide special education, English language, and gifted and talented services.** SEAs can support a greater pool of local talent by providing rural teachers alternative routes for licensure or endorsement and by supporting “grow your own” programs. While this approach has its opponents, high-quality alternative routes to licensure have the potential to address shortages in specialized areas.

Most alternative routes for licensure provide prospective teachers new ways to access traditional college courses, making them particularly appealing for rural teachers who are geographically isolated. For example, Boise State University’s Technology Accentuated Transformative Education of Rural Specialists is a collaborative two-year online program that allows teachers to receive state certification in special education.<sup>24</sup>

SEAs can partner with institutions of higher education (IHEs) to create distance or online teacher preparation programs for practicing teachers.

Montana, which struggles with special education teacher shortages in rural areas, developed a statewide collaboration with five IHEs<sup>25</sup> to provide graduate level courses, onsite mentoring, and tuition waivers for general education teachers who commit to at least two years teaching in a special education setting. The program has helped rural LEAs fill 336 special education positions since its inception in 1989.

Other alternative routes allow teachers to more quickly and easily obtain multiple endorsements and licensing. For example, a new program at the University of Nebraska's Kearney campus reduced the preparation requirements needed for a rural LEA to fill a single K–12 special education teacher position. Previously, the state required aspiring teachers to complete two separate programs for K–6 and 7–12 licensure.<sup>26</sup>

SEAs can also support rural LEAs in accessing local talent.<sup>27</sup> In “grow your own” teacher models, rural LEAs partner with SEAs or IHEs to identify and prepare local talent for positions that are difficult to fill. Given that most teachers tend to stay near their community,<sup>28</sup> these strategies hold great potential for addressing recruitment and retention issues in rural LEAs. The Illinois Grow Your Own Teacher Education Initiative involves partnerships between IHEs, LEAs, and community-based organizations that work together to recruit and develop local talent. Though currently administered by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois SEA was instrumental in creating the project, which has graduated teachers prepared to teach special education and bilingual education in rural settings.<sup>29</sup>

**Support efforts to implement e-mentoring programs to retain quality teachers of special populations.** Many new rural teachers of special populations feel that they lack access to adequate resources, knowledge, and quality professional development. SEAs can reduce professional isolation and improve access to professional development by providing innovative approaches to online mentoring.<sup>30</sup> These programs provide new teachers opportunities to engage in professional collaborative problem solving to address challenging situations, navigate complicated state and federal paperwork requirements, and provide immediate access to answers. These types of programs are also extremely valuable in providing support to unqualified teachers working toward certification. Evidence suggests that these programs have a direct impact on student achievement as well as teacher retention.<sup>31</sup>

### E-Mentoring for Student Success

Supported by the Kansas State Department of Education, E-Mentoring for Student Success focuses on curbing attrition of new special education teachers by providing a matched mentor. The mentor and the rural teacher meet at least two times a week, and the mentor is always available via email. Mentors cost about \$3,000 annually, depending on the number of mentees, and districts pay \$1,200 per teacher to participate.

**Ensure rural LEAs have access to alternative methods of service delivery for special populations.** Technology has significant potential to help overcome the challenges of providing services and supports to students with unique needs when qualified staff are not available. While many options are available, two that hold significant promise in rural areas are online learning and teletherapy.

For rural LEAs unable to provide access to certain courses or opportunities because of low teacher-student ratios or unfilled positions, the use of distance or virtual education may be the only viable option.<sup>32</sup> While distance education for students has been used in rural schools for decades, it is becoming more cost effective and accessible. Virtual schools can provide rural LEAs with the resources to ensure G&T students can access advanced coursework. Evidence suggests that high-quality distance education may decrease racial/ethnic achievement gaps and increase scores on college readiness exams.<sup>33</sup>

Although more research is needed, recent evidence suggests that online schools also have the potential to support delivery of special education services<sup>34</sup> and instruction for ELLs.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the U.S. Department of Education requires that students attending virtual schools must be afforded the same protections under federal law as their peers in traditional settings. SEAs can support rural LEAs by ensuring that rural schools are prepared to support online learning for special populations, comply with state and federal compliance requirements, and ensure individual student needs are met. The Arkansas Department of Education provided state grants to rural LEAs to address the initial start-up costs associated with implementing distance education.

While districts may prefer face-to-face delivery of services, evidence from the field suggests that teletherapy has the potential to meet the needs of special populations while maintaining costs and quality. In 2011, *Education Week* reported that speech and language teletherapy is a promising approach for meeting student needs, saving money, and ensuring access to therapists.<sup>36</sup> Over the last decade, several states have piloted teletherapy programs for services delivered by speech language pathologists, occupational therapists,

and physical therapists.<sup>37</sup> The Ohio Masters Network Initiatives in Education found that online speech language pathologist services resulted in similar outcomes as face-to-face sessions and that the program could cost-effectively address state those shortages in rural schools.<sup>38</sup> While the research is limited, the model holds promise for addressing shortages in other hard to fill positions, like ELL teachers.

LEAs will need significant support from SEAs to implement effective teletherapy programs. In Washington State, the SEA provided start-up grant opportunities using IDEA funds to assist LEAs in building capacity for and scale-up of a teletherapy program.<sup>39</sup> This approach provided LEAs the flexibility to develop services that matched student needs and local resources. Rural LEAs used funds to purchase essential equipment and train in-school therapy assistants who assisted the licensed therapist during teletherapy sessions.

**Ease the burden of compliance monitoring.** SEAs should implement strategies to streamline the amount of paperwork rural LEAs must complete (see Box 1). For example, SEAs could consolidate reporting requirements to simplify the process of reporting progress on multiple projects. Doing so requires SEAs to collaborate across departments to identify and address reporting redundancies in different programs. In addition, SEAs may consider reducing the frequency with which rural LEAs complete and submit certain regulatory documents and making required paperwork more efficient. Comprehensive data systems have the potential to reduce redundancy by allowing LEAs to pull existing information directly into reporting mechanisms.

### Box 1: Shifting Monitoring From Compliance to Performance

Because reporting requirements vary, being aware of and ensuring academic achievement for special populations is perhaps the most significant challenge that schools face. According to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the academic achievement of students with disabilities lags significantly behind their peers.<sup>40</sup> Yet, states, not schools, determine minimum cell size requirements for analysis of subgroups such as SWD and ELL; these requirements can vary from as few as 5 to as many as 100 students across states.<sup>41</sup> This variation has particular implications for accountability of special populations in rural schools, which often have subgroup representation at rates much smaller than the minimum sample sizes required in their states: in many cases, schools and LEAs are not accountable for how subgroups from certain schools performed on their state assessments. It may also mean that non-accountable schools have little incentive to focus their limited resources on special populations, a risk that may be particularly problematic for rural schools. This hypothesis warrants further empirical investigation.

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States must work to pivot their monitoring of rural LEAs from a focus on burdensome compliance to a focus on student achievement. SEAs could:

- Reconsider minimum size requirements that will expand accountability for special populations to more schools, including rural schools.
- Require that school improvement grantees plan specifically for SWD and other special populations as part of their improvement applications. SEAs could also provide technical assistance to rural applicants to help them craft and implement these plans for their specific context.
- Provide training and assistance to help LEAs understand the implications of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Results-Driven Accountability initiative, and how it may be implemented in connection with other reform efforts.
- Work to implement a [State Systemic Improvement Plan](#), which provides a framework to create a more integrated approach to serving all students, including those with special needs.

### **Help rural LEAs maximize federal funding opportunities for special**

**populations.** Investing in staff with grant writing skills, along with training and targeted support from SEAs, can increase rural LEA participation in federal grant initiatives. The U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation and Improvement (i3) grant competition provides a unique opportunity for rural LEAs to engage in development and evaluation of models that support at-risk populations. In 2014, \$134.8 million was available to support three grant competitions: development, validation, and scale-up.<sup>43</sup> The i3 program supports five priority areas, all of which may be submitted in combination with a sixth priority area, Serving Rural Communities, an important element for rural LEAs. Of the 562 organizations that submitted "Intent to Apply" documents for the 2014 Development pre-competition, only 184 (33 percent) addressed serving rural communities, and very few of these applicants addressed special populations. Of the initial rural submissions, only 14 (2.5 percent) addressed SWD in rural communities, and 18 (3.2 percent) addressed ELL in rural communities. Given that rural communities were deemed a priority in this competition, SEAs could have provided useful support to rural LEAs by advertising these competitions, sponsoring grant-writing workshops, connecting potential partners, furnishing data or letters of support for applicants, supporting dissemination of findings to other LEAs, and helping LEAs identify foundations in the state willing to provide required matching funds to awardees. Although SEAs may not serve as official partners in this work, their knowledge of federal grant-making processes provides a useful catalyst to rural LEAs. And the rigorous evaluation criteria and emphasis on scale-up mean that promising findings for rural projects focusing on special populations could provide useful models for other rural LEAs struggling to serve these groups.



OSEP's State Personnel Development Grant competition provides another useful way for SEAs to support the development of staff who serve special populations in rural LEAs. OSEP typically identifies priority areas for these grants (e.g., response to intervention, teacher professional development), and grant awards range from \$80,000 to \$2 million, depending on the size of the state or territory. One way that states with significant numbers of rural LEAs could support districts through this competition is to allocate a specific number or percentage of slots for rural sites or staff participation in grant activities. For projects in which these grants include development of model demonstration sites, a representative percentage of these sites should be in rural LEAs. SEAs could also make willingness to serve as a mentor for other LEAs a requirement for participation.

### **Engage in collaborative conversations with rural LEAs to identify effective solutions and reduce barriers for meeting the needs of special populations.**

Understanding the issues rural communities face can significantly increase the effectiveness of supports and technical assistance that SEAs provide. The single most effective way to find out what rural LEAs need is to engage in collaborative conversations with them. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan employed this strategy to learn firsthand about the challenges faced by rural LEAs in various local contexts.<sup>44</sup> See Box 2, outlining five suggestions for increasing how SEAs can be more effective in communicating with and providing supports to rural LEAs.

### **Box 2: Strategies for Increasing SEA Effectiveness With Rural LEAs**

1. **Engage rural distinctiveness.** Ensure that policies and programs align with local goals and values.
2. **Accommodate restraints.** Understand what resources rural LEAs have or are able to have.
3. **Offer opportunities for connection.** Provide networks for collaboration and communication with others.
4. **Enlist rural strengths.** Understand what the rural LEA brings to the table and build on those strengths; avoid focusing on the barriers.
5. **Link assistance to place.** Make the program or support relevant and be sure to leverage community resources and opportunities.

Source: Caitlin Howley, *Rooted in Place: Responsive Rural Education Technical Assistance* (Fairfax, VA: ICF International, Inc., 2013).

Increasing communication opportunities between the SEA and rural LEAs can significantly reduce the professional isolation felt by staff in many rural LEAs. While not a common practice, the use of satellite SEA offices may remove some of the geographical barriers that often exist between rural LEAs and SEAs.<sup>45</sup> Closer proximity also increases opportunities for rural LEAs to be involved in developing and reviewing policies impacting service availability for their special populations.

## CONCLUSION

Rural LEAs face a variety of challenges in their efforts to serve special populations. These challenges are rooted in difficulties recruiting and retaining quality staff, limited financial resources, and burdensome non-instructional demands. By working to provide greater flexibility in program requirements, engaging in collaborative conversations with rural stakeholders, supporting alternative models for helping LEAs access qualified specialists, and developing models for e-mentoring, SEAs have the potential to increase the ability of rural LEAs to improve student outcomes. Although these are systemic and complex challenges that do not have simple one-time remedies, the increasing diversity in American schools—including those in rural areas—makes it imperative for state and local authorities to foster these kinds of collaborative, solution-oriented relationships to ensure that all students, including those with specialized learning needs, have access to a high-quality public education.

## ENDNOTES

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3. "Rural Education in America," National Center for Education Statistics, *Table C.1.c.-1 Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools With a Teaching Vacancy in Selected Teaching Fields by the School's Reported Level of Difficulty in Filling the Vacancy, Teaching Field, and Locale: 2007-08*, [www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables\\_archive.asp](http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables_archive.asp).
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  16. Ellen G. Batt, “Teachers’ Perceptions of ELL Education: Potential Solutions to Overcome the Greatest Challenges,” *Multicultural Education* 15, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 41.
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