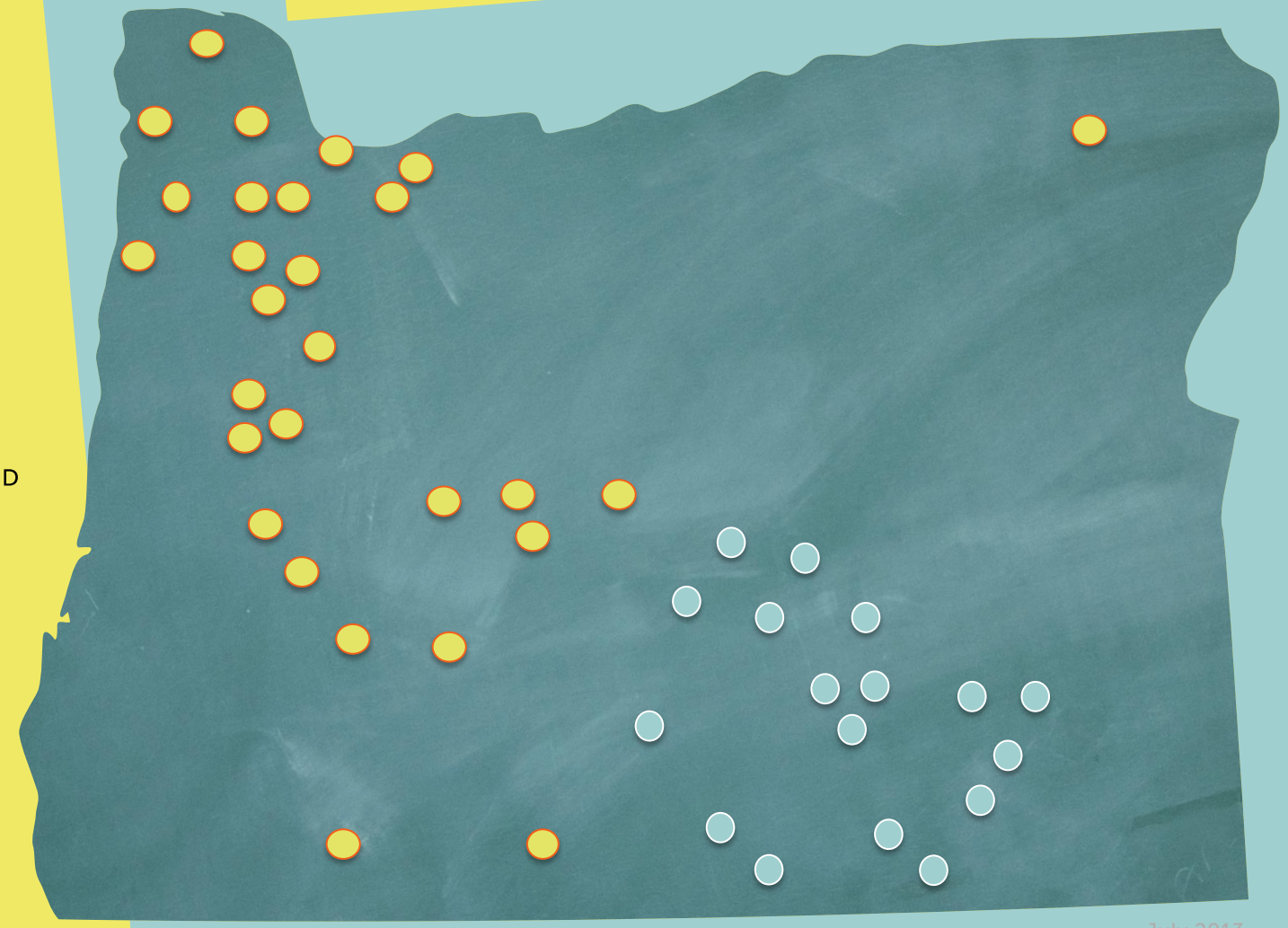
Research: Reform in Rural School Districts

A Brief Overview of the Challenges

CLASS/TIF/252 Districts in Oregon

*Including Rural Districts



- Current CLASS/ TIF/252
- New CLASS Districts
- Pre-CLASS/ R and D

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So, *what* is rural?

Population-based definitions

***Culturally-based* definitions**

Places are rural because people who live there think of themselves as being rural with respect to a set of social, moral, and cultural values, connections to landscapes and/or a lifestyle more attuned to local community…

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Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts: Strengths

- Less bureaucracy
- Lower pupil-teacher ratio
- Lower drop out rates
- Greater fiscal effort
- Greater parental involvement
- Greater community support for school district

Key source: Stephens, E.R. (1999). *Expanding the vision: New roles for educational service agencies in rural school district improvement*. Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc.

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Institutional Capacity of Rural Districts: Challenges

- Fewer management support systems
- Greater per pupil cost
- Higher number of teachers teaching outside major specialty at secondary level
- Less breadth and depth in secondary program (especially in science, math, languages)
- Fewer programs for students with disabilities
- Less availability of telecommunication technology and/or access to broadband
- Less fiscal capacity
- Less specialized space and equipment for science, math, languages
- Less availability of planning support services
- Fewer evaluation support services

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Instructional Support Capacity Needs

Assist with curriculum development process

- Planning and writing customized standard-based lesson plans for classroom implementation to meet local needs
- Identifying web-based instructional resources

Explore models of best practice for teaching and learning

- Identifying and implementing best practices for standards-aligned teaching strategies

Programs for at-risk children

- Identifying proven best practices to serve at-risk children in a rural school district to meet or exceed state requirements

Enhance instruction (i.e., content specific techniques, materials)

- Content specific curriculum, instructional strategies in mathematics, English, science, and history, to meet student learning needs

Key source: Layman, R. (2000). *Important and needed instructional support services of Regional Educational Centers as perceived by school division superintendents in Virginia.* University of Virginia.

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Examples of Rural Capacity Limitations

Implementing federal and state curriculum standards

- Low capacity to develop instructional classroom materials, train teachers, monitor implementation, or evaluate results (e.g., No or limited Director of Instruction & Assessment)
- Limited access to content specialist because district can only afford to hire a generalist
- Inadequate time and resources for principals and teachers to develop necessary materials

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Examples of Rural Capacity Limitations

Enhancing teacher quality

- 80% of principals and teachers lived in neighboring county
- Teachers hired away after they were upgraded
- Teacher out of classroom to receive training, with limited pool of qualified subs available, then upgraded teacher leaves in 3 years, with the result that the district must start over with another teacher
- If teacher not living in county, means teacher can take another job and likely not have to move, will reduce commute time, and likely will receive higher pay

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Examples of Rural Capacity Limitations

Supporting technology initiatives

- Limited district capacity in terms of technology infrastructure and staff to implement state technology initiatives (i.e., state testing, interactive web site, curriculum materials, online course work)

Increasing data use capacity

- No funded position in district for data analysis (i.e., student assessment data)
- Tasks must be performed at school level, usually by the most capable volunteer
- Limited ability to warehouse data on numerous state initiatives implemented in the school division over several years ("what works")
- Giving value to perceived compliance reports

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Examples of Rural Capacity Limitations

Providing leadership for school improvement

- Unrealistic demands on principal to accomplish all the initiatives, with no assistant principal to share the workload
- Limited capacity to support school leaders (i.e., principal and lead teachers) during early stages of implementing a new state initiative
- Limited capacity to recruit and retain principals for high poverty rural schools, especially if they choose to live outside the district because of undesirable housing and other amenities

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Summary of Common Themes

- Slow, rushed or incomplete implementation is likely associated with rural capacity limitations.
- People, systems, and resources are often at a premium in rural districts.
- When rural districts serve as “farm teams,” replenishing local capacity is a continual challenge as teachers and leaders are recruited out.
- Assistance with specific needs (e.g., training in the use of identified promising practices), support from intermediate units, and strategies to augment capacity may help improve rural implementation.

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What does the data say?

- Achievement and graduation rates are average
- Post secondary transition data is less promising.

Issue…

- Where does the motivation to engage in reform come from?
- How do we build capacity to support educators in rural school districts?

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Lessons Learned

Initial Assumptions

- Development of local human capacity
- On-going, differentiated and job-embedded professional development
- Shared leadership
- Alternate career pathways is an incentive to maintaining quality work force
- Attitude of reform/readiness from local leaders and district needs

New Learning

- Supplemented human capacity is essential for successful implementation
- Redesigning the professional learning delivery model is needed
- Regional Networking will support some capacity needs
- New incentives are needed to maintain quality work force
- Prioritizing and differentiating the roll out of initiatives is needed
- Where does the attitude to reform come from?

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Maybe….

- We consider a differentiated approach to reform in rural areas based on capacity needs
  - Redesigning reporting expectations
  - Reframing assumptions about time
  - Designing new approaches to implementation
  - Creating incentives to change and be leaders in the region
- We consider structure and functions of the ESDs
- We link education improvement and community development
- Learning can not be rushed