

A Rural Needs Study:
Improving CDE Services to Rural School Districts

Prepared for
The Colorado Department of Education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	1
Study Methodology.....	1
Limitations of this study	2
Brief Review of Literature on Rural Schools	2
Definition of “Rural”	3
Other State Models	4
Findings and Recommendations.....	5
Chief Recommendation: Rural Council.....	5
1. Initiative Fatigue	6
2. Reporting and Data Overload: One size does not fit all.....	6
3. State Consolidation is feared and will be fought.....	8
4. No Rural Voice at CDE	8
5. Problematic Licensure Process.....	9
7. Improving Staff Development	9
8. Challenges of Staff Recruitment and Retention.....	10
9. Need for Inter-district Cooperation	11
Other Issues in Rural Districts	11
Turnaround Schools	11
Diversity: All rural areas are not the same	12
Conclusion.....	13
References	14
Appendix: Interview protocol/questionnaires	15

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Introduction

The state of Colorado has 178 school districts dispersed across 104,000 square miles, with 142 of those districts – 80 percent – recognized as rural. Surprisingly, those rural districts are responsible for just 20 percent of the student population in the state, which means that the rural school districts in Colorado generally have comparatively small student populations, teacher ranks, and per-pupil operating revenue. Despite the small percentage of students served, rural districts are essential and inviolate components of Colorado’s education heritage. Indeed, like most states in the country, Colorado’s rural schools and districts created and nurtured the state education system, and they continue to ably serve rural communities in the face of severe economic constraints, significant population shifts and increased compliance requirements.

In summer 2010, Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones asked researchers Phil Fox and David Van Sant to conduct a study of the rural school districts in Colorado, specifically to determine if rural districts were satisfied with the assistance provided by the Colorado Department of Education, what additional assistance the department could provide, and also to determine how turnaround schools in rural districts were faring.

While the Colorado Department of Education serves and regulates all school districts in the state, there has never been a single strong, institutionalized entity – governmental or otherwise – that represents and advocates explicitly for the 80 percent of districts that are rural and the particular concerns of rural schools. Moreover, those concerns are significant. In addition to providing a high-quality education to all students, rural districts must comply – and submit evidence of that compliance – with state and federal funding and accountability requirements, and implement policy and rule changes, and do so with fewer dollars, fewer staff and across greater distances. These circumstances create both a moral and fiscal imperative for education and government leaders to work together with rural school districts to make wise decisions to address problems, to give a voice to rural education, and to honor rural students throughout the state. The purpose of this study is to identify the concerns and priorities of rural school districts and how CDE addresses these concerns. The study’s recommendations are intended to assist CDE in better serving the rural constituency of Colorado.

Study Methodology

As a first step in this project, we developed questionnaires (see appendix) targeted at district superintendents and school board members to be used for interviews and focus groups. Between Aug. 1 and Dec. 15, 2010, we traveled more than 4,000 miles around the state to speak personally with rural superintendents and school board members, either individually or as part of focus groups set up by the BOCES that served the area. We also solicited information via telephone interviews and e-mail communications. Interview and focus group participants also were given the opportunity to provide additional information in written form. Additionally, new superintendents were encouraged to respond in writing so that to help us discern individual differences with veteran superintendents. In all, we

contacted and/or interviewed all but two rural superintendents. More than 41 school board members of rural districts were contacted, with 10 responding.

Limitations of this Study

Any *qualitative* study such as this one is only as valid as the responses that are provided by the individuals interviewed. In several instances, we felt that respondents were more forthcoming in written responses compared to sometimes “politically correct” responses during personal interviews. Also, the number of responses from board members does not constitute a large enough sample to be reliable, primarily because most board members do not work directly with nor are as knowledgeable about CDE. In hindsight, board members probably should have been eliminated from the original study proposal.

Some of the recommendations proposed in this study are our own conclusions based on our experience and expertise, and were not necessarily discussed or vetted with all interviewees. Before any of these recommendations can be accepted, follow-up discussions with rural superintendents and CDE leaders should take place to determine if the proposed solutions are viable and appropriate.

This report consists of four main parts. The first is a brief review of the recent literature on rural education. The second section reviews what is happening in rural areas in the United States followed by a section that defines *rural* in Colorado. The final part discusses the findings of all interviews, focus groups and written responses and offers possible solutions.

Brief Review of Literature on Rural Education

Rural areas are in a period of transition, which has had a profound impact on rural schools and districts. In the November 2010 ASCD *Educational Leadership* issue, author James A. Bryant, Jr. presents a comprehensive – and alarming – picture of rural communities and the challenges faced by rural schools. Bryant reports that 35 percent of residents in rural areas live below the poverty level, 26.3 percent live just above the poverty line, and 38 percent qualify free and reduced-price lunch. Bryant cites data from the Center on Education Policy reporting achievement gaps (in mathematics, language arts and English by students with disabilities and without disabilities) in 68 percent of rural schools. Bryant concludes, “The quaint image of the little red school house that many Americans cling to is, sadly, fantasy.”

Because so many rural residents live just above or just below the poverty line, they have been hit especially hard by current economic recession. Bryant notes that “federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind have forced rural schools to choose whether to spend money where it may be most needed – for example, to improve deteriorating facilities or attract more qualified teachers – or spend it complying with government regulations to meet less urgent needs.” Furthermore, research indicates that federal funds covered 9 percent of rural district budgets compared to 11 percent in urban areas. (Roellke, 2003 and Provasnik, et al., 2007).

Much has also been written about the low salaries and geographic isolation that teachers encounter in rural areas. Rural districts face a constant challenge to attract and retain quality teachers. Superintendents and building administrators report that it is difficult to attract teachers to rural areas that often lack social and cultural opportunities.

Bryant argues that, “for rural education, perhaps the primary obstacle is willful ignorance.” He cites a March 2010 *New York Times* article that discusses the growing concerns among local state and federal lawmakers that education policy is out of touch with the needs of rural educators and children which Bryant referred to as “urban bias in federal policy.” The attempt to standardize everything in education has led to “the laughable notion that one size fits all.”

A 2009 report from the Rural School and Community Trust, *Why Rural Matters* by Jerry Johnson and Marty Strange, described the problems of rural schools in Colorado as well as the rest of the country and maintained that rural districts were not receiving comparable allocations of operating funds. This was particularly significant when “providing equal educational opportunities for impoverished children.” The report ranked Colorado in the top quartile of states with inequitable distribution of revenue.

So what is *rural*?

One of the conditions of examining rural schools and districts is to have an appropriate definition of *rural*. The federal government, through the Department of Agriculture, uses an elaborate system called the Beale Codes that calculates GPS coordinates and relative distances from urban centers to define *rural*. Two designations are used: one for areas outside an incorporated area, and one for a rural area inside an incorporated area. Consideration also is given to how far each rural area is from a metropolitan center. In Colorado this system is often inaccurate and extremely misleading. A school district designated as non-rural may be completely surrounded by districts designated as rural. (The map of Colorado’s district designations, *Changes in school district rural locale status*, is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/PDF/states/CO.pdfsdistricts>.)

At odds with the Beale Codes designation is the Colorado State Finance Act, which has identified 86 districts as “rural” and 47 districts as “outlying towns,” a total of 133 school districts in the state, or 74 percent of total. Adding to the confusion, during the course of this study we learned that CDE has an informal definition of *rural*: school districts with less than 3,000 students. The number of school districts that meet this definition is 146 or 82 percent of all districts in the state. It is also worth noting that, according to the Rural School and Community Trust, Colorado rural districts serve a very diverse student population, the tenth highest percentage in the country. A breakdown of Colorado school districts by number of students is presented in the table below:

COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Number of Districts</i>
Less than 300	33
More than 300, less than 1,200	24
More than 1,201, less than 6,000	41
More than 6,001	27

Source: Colorado Department of Education

Defining *rural districts* in Colorado is even more problematic for three additional reasons. Some districts in rural areas known as exurbs more accurately can be considered suburban, for example, Elizabeth, Fort Lupton, Johnstown – cases in which urban areas expanded into terrain that was previously agricultural. The mountain resort communities such as Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, and Summit County create a similar designation problem: they are in rural areas, i.e., non-urban areas, but they do not really serve a rural constituency. Lastly, a number of districts have exceeded the 3,000-pupil threshold set by CDE, but district leaders deemed that they were “rural” and not “urban.” Examples include Pueblo County School District 70, Montrose School District RE-1J and Mesa County School District 51 in Grand Junction.

We have concluded that districts themselves should decide if the designation of rural is appropriate for their school district. A definition offered by Marty Strange of The Rural School and Community Trust captures the haphazard nature of defining *rural*: “Rural is any place that is smaller than the place that I live.”

Even when we acknowledge the difficulty in defining rural, it is indisputable that approximately three-fourths of the school districts in Colorado are rural. The findings and recommendations in this report reflect the challenges these districts face. By any definition, these districts represent most of the communities in Colorado and more than 150,000 Colorado students. The needs and the challenges of these communities and their schools must be considered by our state institutions.

Other State Models

As part of this study we contacted various individuals with expertise, experience and knowledge of rural schools. These included: Marty Strange, Policy Director The Rural School and Community Trust; Dr. Brian Talbot, Executive Director, Association of Educational Service Agencies; Dr. Jim Johnson, Professor, Ohio University; Dr. Rich McBride, Superintendent’s Office, North Central Educational Services (Washington); Dr. Andrea Lawrence, Professor, American University; and Noelle Ellerson, Assistant Director, Policy Analysis and Advocacy, American Association of School Administrators.

We also examined rural school district structures and practices in other states. Most states have a dedicated plan of regional services, especially where education is state-controlled and not locally controlled. Most western states have regional service models of local

control with the state providing services to rural districts. Washington leads the way in trying to equalize services in the state, with an expanded BOCES program in which resources are shared across the state. As a result, all BOCES, i.e., schools and districts, have received additional state resources.

Ohio has completed a major reorganization of service units, and the Department of Rural Studies at Ohio University provides valuable support to rural school districts. Northeastern states have plans to work with rural districts, although these districts are not comparable to the large geographical area that Colorado covers. We learned that several service centers assist rural districts in the Ozark area of Arkansas, largely without the support of the state but with the assistance of a university.

Colorado has a model that is neither fish nor fowl. No one has examined the BOCES structure in 50 years to determine if the BOCES agencies adequately serve the needs of the communities or if a new model is needed. Moreover, the rural districts lost a huge source of support in 2008 when the number of regional service managers at CDE was reduced from 12 to two. Up until that time the regional services unit had provided consistent and personal assistance to rural superintendents throughout the state.

Research of state models for rural outreach did not identify any structure or strategic plan that would fit seamlessly into Colorado. Rather, Colorado requires a model that is tailored to the needs of Colorado's rural school districts, one that takes into consideration the state's geography, history of local control and statewide capabilities.

Findings and Recommendations

Through interviews, focus groups and research we developed a number of recommendations and possible solutions to the problems and concerns of the rural districts in Colorado, which are presented below. A number of the solutions that can be considered "no cost" are indicated as such. Others will require additional state or local dollars to implement and manage.

The **chief recommendation** of this report is that education and government leaders in Colorado, with the full support and command of the governor's office, state board of education, and the general assembly, create a **Rural Council** to oversee, support, conduct research and advocate for the needs, concerns and particular problems of rural education districts. The Rural Council would be the state entity to provide resources, information and assistance to rural school districts related to reviewing legislation, partnerships, brokerage of services and communication. The council would represent all the rural school districts in Colorado, advocate for their needs and concerns, and foster collaboration among the districts, professional associations and the Colorado Department of Education to advance education reform in the state. The Rural Council would oversee the creation of a state plan on rural education that is developed cooperatively by rural superintendents with input from the BOCES, professional associations and CDE.

Findings

1. Initiative Fatigue

Many rural superintendents described watching the reform movement over the last 10 years as like watching the battle between Godzilla and Mothra. Often they felt the effects of the dispute between reform and anti-reform, but seldom have they been asked to participate in the creation of new initiatives. The perception is that reforms come directly from the State Board and the legislature, even though they are often the result of federal mandates. Indeed, rural superintendents feel the federal government understands *rural* even less than state government officials.

Superintendents feel that the reform initiatives coming from Denver and Washington, D.C., one after another, have not really addressed the needs or concerns of *rural* schools. Moreover, some districts reported that while they are still trying to implement initiatives from the past three years, the state has added additional programs or mandates. This churn of new initiatives and reform efforts has led to considerable frustration and distrust. One such initiative cited by several superintendents is RTI, which seemed very promising in its initial implementation. Now, however, in the fourth or fifth year of implementation, superintendents report having received very little assistance or in-service from the state. Two other examples are the new academic standards and the new teacher evaluation system (SB 10-191). Superintendents expressed feeling disconnected from the process of developing the standards and evaluation system, and were not fully aware of where and how to access information on the process. Particularly because of the small number of staff in rural districts, clear and frequent communication from CDE is crucial.

Proposed Solutions:

- (NO MONETARY COST) A two-year moratorium on new initiatives to allow time for implementation of existing mandates and the new academic standards.
- Ensure that all mandates include funding for staff development.
- (NO MONETARY COST) Increase and improve communication to rural school districts to ensure clarity on several fronts: differences between state and federal mandates; where to find information; and how superintendents can contribute to and/or participate in new initiatives and reform strategies.

2. Reporting and Data Overload: One Size Does Not Fit All

Many rural district superintendents expressed weariness and anger at the notion that their districts have the same resources as the large Front Range districts, particularly staff and dollars. Leadership staffing varies considerably in rural districts, and the superintendent very often wears at least five different hats within the administration. Twenty-seven school districts have only a single administrator, the superintendent, who also serves as the instructional leader, transportation director and athletic director. Needless to say, rural districts have limited support positions as well. Many interviewees expressed the feeling that no one in Denver – at the state board, CDE or in the legislature – truly understands that rural administrators must do in a day, or the time commitment required to operate the

district, implement programs, manage staff and meet compliance requirements. State and federal reporting requirements, as well as the mandatory trainings by CDE, add significantly to rural superintendents' plates and stress levels, but the requirements do not come with any extra resources.

In this study we tried to get our arms around just how much data districts are being asked to submit. The 2006 report from the Colorado Association of School Executives, *State Data Reporting Requirements*, documents every report and indicator that districts are required to report to CDE, the state board of education, parents, county commissioners, the general public and others on a myriad of issues: accreditation, at-risk students, grants, immigrant students, finance, building and facilities, indigent students, online learning – the list goes on for 59 pages. Very often, the same information is requested multiple times. Rural administrators also expressed frustration that CDE sometimes requests certain information on short notice without regard to the time of the year or what is happening in a district – although they also recognize that state legislators or the U. S. Department of Education often make these last-minute requests. Even so, data reporting is an enormous burden on rural districts, which very often lack expertise in technology and statistics. One group of superintendents reviewed the FTE (full-time staff equivalent) required to complete all reports and determined it to be at least 1.5 staff members. This issue is one that illustrates how out of touch CDE can sometime seem with the workload and day-to-day operations of rural districts.

Proposed Solutions:

- (NO MONETARY COST) Streamline data requests to match rural capacities. As decided cooperatively by rural superintendents and the Commissioner of Education, eliminate or exempt some of the required reporting for districts under 1,500 students, particularly reports/data that do not provide useful information to rural administrators and/or communities.
- (NO MONETARY COST) Streamline the reporting *process*: use a format where default information on each district is included in all reports; publish a yearly calendar of *all* reporting requirements for school districts, detailing the reports and data required each month; extend the “shelf-life” of selected reports to an agreed-upon term before new data are required; allow the use of one password for users to submit all data rather than the multiple passwords currently used for each program.
- As part of the data improvement efforts underway at CDE, include a strategic plan for rural districts, and engage support from the BOCES agencies (for example, employ a regional data person, hired by the BOCES, to be in charge of data collection and submission for several small districts).
- (NO MONETARY COST) Allow districts to send a representative in place of the superintendent to CDE trainings, and use webinars or podcasts instead of in-person training, with training offered on multiple dates.
- To discuss and develop all of these ideas, convene regional meetings of rural superintendents and CDE staff in several areas of the state. Also provide opportunities for rural superintendents to meet with each other and CDE staff at other state and regional meetings of CDE, CASB and CASE.

3. State Consolidation Is Feared and Will Be Fought

Among Colorado superintendents, nothing invokes more fear, loathing, and hostility than the word *consolidation*. Memories of consolidation efforts in the 1940s, '50s and '60s are yet a part of school administration folklore embedded in superintendents' collective psyches. The operative expression here is "forced" or "mandatory" consolidation. But even attempts at voluntary consolidation in the past decade (for example, Julesburg) failed or were abandoned because the current process is costly, lengthy and very complex.

A Bit of History: In the early 1990s, there was "chatter" in the general assembly that Denver Public Schools and Jeffco Public Schools were getting "too big for their britches." Some individuals suggested that the two districts should be broken up into smaller districts. At the time, the chair of the Senate Education Committee was from Jeffco and the chair of the House Education Committee was from Denver. The two committee chairs collaborated to produce the School District Reorganization Act of 1992, which made district consolidation and de-consolidation so lengthy, expensive, and complex a process that it assured that Jeffco and DPS would never be de-consolidated. The Act also ensured that smaller rural districts would never be consolidated.

Proposed Solution:

- **(NO MONETARY COST)** We strongly recommend modification of the 1992 Act to allow voluntary consolidation of districts below a certain pupil size (for example, 1,000) subject to "approval of the local boards of education." For two or more districts that may elect to consolidate, the per-pupil revenue would be averaged over a set period of time (five years, for example). This modification to the 1992 Act would affect approximately 50 school districts in Colorado, many of which have seriously declining enrollments. Voluntary consolidation could, at a minimum, give rural districts a viable option to keep operating in a positive arrangement and avoid the significant time and effort required of involuntary consolidation (planning committees, multiple elections, attorney fees) or district closure.

4. No Rural Voice at CDE

In July 2008, the field service unit at the department of education was effectively decimated due to a correction in the allocation of federal funds. Until that time the regional services office had provided personal and targeted services to rural districts whereby one regional services representative would spend a week visiting rural districts in each of the 12 regional service areas to provide assistance on compliance, data and generally to stay informed about the district. The staffing change reduced the number of regional services people from 12 to two to cover the whole state. To say that there has been some confusion and difficulty with this decision in the rural areas cannot be overstated. Some rural leaders still do not know why there was a change, while others wish that there would be no CDE contact with rural schools.

While the efforts of the two regional service managers (Jhon Penn and John Condie) are highly appreciated and widely respected, there is a commonly held opinion that the concerns of small rural districts do not have a voice within the upper echelon of CDE. Moreover, there is a sentiment that services to rural districts have declined in the past five years. As one rural superintendent stated, “While some things have improved, overall services are worse. Five years ago the regional representatives actually knew what was going on in my district and the team led by Jhon Penn often provided a level of meaningful support to our schools. That is no longer the case.”

Proposed Solution:

- The goals of CDE and rural districts would be well-served by creating a new position, Assistant Commissioner for Rural Districts, who would report to the Commissioner and oversee or at least work closely with the current staff of regional services. In addition, the regional services unit should be expanded. To think that two staff members can provide adequate service to almost 140 rural districts is sheer folly. In addition, Colorado very much needs a coordinated plan to serve rural areas on all issues – education, employment, health care, etc. All areas of the government need to develop one integrated plan to provide the needed services to rural areas on a consistent basis.

5. Problematic Licensure Process

A huge concern among many rural superintendents is licensure. We repeatedly heard complaints about the licensure process taking up to a year to complete, sometimes delaying Title I funds to the district. New teacher candidates submit applications electronically through the CDE Web site and teachers who are renewing or seeking additional endorsements must submit paperwork through the mail. Regardless of which method is used – and it’s not clear on the CDE Web site which method should be used – the wait time is way too long and a source of great frustration for most superintendents, one of whom termed the process, “an interminable black hole.” We heard similar concerns about the process of “red flagging” staff members by the department following background checks, an issue which was covered in the Denver press last summer. We learned that districts often wait as long as one year for resolution from CDE on “red-flagged” staff members – an incredibly slow turnaround time for such a critically important process.

One superintendent shared with us a practice that seems to short-circuit the system. To deal with the wait time for licensure or renewal, the superintendent grants professional leave time and sends the employee to the CDE office to sit and wait until the employee receives a license – however long it takes. We are concerned that this “innovative” idea might quickly become the norm and not an exception if changes do not occur swiftly.

Proposed Solutions:

- The process for becoming licensed in Colorado should be fully computerized with user-friendly and crystal clear instructions and navigation on the CDE Web site. A cursory examination of other states’ department of education Websites (Oklahoma and Kansas in particular) showed a very clear and detailed process for licensing and

renewal, including answers to frequently asked questions and certification guidelines. Similarly, it is incumbent on the part of CDE to speed up the notification and resolution of district employees that have been red- flagged following background checks; it should take no longer than four weeks.

- (NO MONETARY COST) Increase the fees for new applicants and for renewals. Dollars accumulated by this increase would offset the costs for improving and expanding access and technology on the CDE Web site.

6. Improving Staff Development

All school districts in Colorado have suffered under the fiscal constraints of the past two years, but one area that has been most affected is staff development. Many of the superintendents we met are overwhelmed by the requirements added over the past several years. The changes in the teacher evaluation component alone were mentioned numerous times as one of the items that needs staff support on regional levels. Also, as noted earlier, RTI was cited as an example of a program that started right but had gone sour. Superintendents reported that initially there was great support from CDE to inform and assist districts on RTI, but now with the difficult part of implementing the RTI program into the mainstream, very few resources and support have been forthcoming.

The orientation seminars for rural superintendents, which used to be convened by Amax in Leadville, were immensely valuable in building relationships, disseminating information and forging an understanding of the roles and priorities of both CDE and the rural districts. This kind of regular event that brings educators and CDE staff together is an excellent vehicle for strengthening and sustaining professional development in the rural districts.

Proposed Solutions:

- BOCES should have an expanded state role in staff training and receive funding to support that role.
- All new rules or legislative mandates should include a three-year implementation model *with funding*.
- (NO MONETARY COST) Frequent and clear communication from CDE is essential, especially *in advance* of rule changes and new requirements, with models and sample implementation plans for districts of all sizes made available to districts on the CDE Web site.
- Provide staff development and required training through online resources, webinars, podcasts and other types of distance learning that do not require individuals to leave their districts.
- Resurrect the annual orientation seminars for rural superintendents; secure sponsorship from local businesses and/or foundations.

7. Challenges of Staff Recruitment and Retention

A number of rural superintendents described the problems associated with employing and retaining qualified staff, particularly NCLB-mandated “highly qualified” teachers, and how difficult this requirement is for remote and revenue-poor rural districts. Administrator

turnover is major concern in rural areas as well. Superintendents and BOCES directors also reported that special education is a constant problem in that present law mandates services which for all practical purposes most rural areas are not able to offer.

Proposed Solution:

- Provide incentives to and assist rural districts in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators. Develop a *statewide* plan that encourages partnerships with Colorado colleges and universities to educate and graduate teacher candidates for placement in rural districts, and to offer course instruction in hard-to-fill areas and subjects, including the arts, special education and mathematics.
- Provide incentives to and assist the BOCES organizations to employ staff on a regional basis to help districts with special education services (occupational therapy, physical therapy, and hard-of-hearing curriculum/classes).
- (NO MONETARY COST) Consider legislation that would allow rural districts to pass mill levies for staff housing.

8. Need for Inter-District Cooperation

As we began this study, we assumed that smaller districts would be heavily involved in cost-sharing efforts with either nearby districts and or other local government entities. We were wrong. Colorado's budget crisis of the past two years has not resulted in cost-sharing efforts between small districts. As we examined the results of our many conversations, the reason became clear: there is virtually no fiscal reason for cooperation that is not quickly overridden by parochial concerns. For example, many small rural districts could easily merge transportation services until they realize that such a change might result in the loss of jobs – which in small communities can cause a major political upheaval. In our interviews with superintendents across Colorado, we became painfully aware of district parochialism. Many of the interviewees accentuated how “unique” his or her district is – just like those interviewed in every other district. We found this provincialism and disinclination to cooperate to be a considerable obstacle to rural districts operating more effectively – even though it is based on a sense of protection and concern for the welfare of the community.

Proposed Solutions:

- (NO MONETARY COST) Inter-district cooperation must be directed and championed by the highest levels of state government. The governor, commissioner of education, and state board of education must lead in this area.
- (NO MONETARY COST) Examine the State Finance Act and other state and district rules to identify disincentives of inter-district cooperation, and determine if revisions are needed and viable.
- A stable system of regional service centers must be created. Participation of local districts should be voluntary, and every effort should be made to build on the existing BOCES. However, the state should create a rational structure and financial incentives that encourage participation of districts in that regional service structure.

Other Issues in Rural Districts

Turnaround Schools

In our interviews and discussions with superintendents we did not hear as much about closing the achievement gap or turnaround schools as we expected. The models developed are designed primarily for urban settings, which are difficult if not impossible to be implemented in rural districts. Even so, there is great deal to be learned from turnaround efforts and the investments made over the past three years, and that information needs to be filtered through the rural lens. New models need to be developed to address the concerns that rural districts face with state and federal programs.

Recommendations for implementing turnaround schools/districts:

- Through an RFP process for rural school districts, develop and implement rural pilot programs that address closing the achievement gap. Disseminate widely the results of these pilots and offer districts opportunities to adopt successful models.
- A constant and elevated communication strategy on options for waivers is needed: provide clear and easily accessible information and support to rural districts about the process and options for waivers – available to both districts and to CDE – from state and federal requirements for districts that are piloting special programs.

Diversity: All rural areas are not the same and should not be treated as such

Colorado is a very diverse state, not only geographically but also in population, resources, employment opportunities, ideology, politics, lifestyle and culture. The mountain resort communities (with a mix of affluent resort areas and lots of immigrant labor) differ significantly from the towns on the Western Slope (gas, oil and mining industries, working class), which are completely unlike communities on the Eastern Plains (agricultural). And most of the state is nothing like – nor does it want to be – the densely populated, center-of-government Front Range. But there are similarities among all regions. Like all states in the country Colorado has been hit hard by the economic recession. Our unemployment rate stands at 8.1 percent. Access to quality medical care is a serious problem throughout the state, particularly for mental health needs. Most Coloradans want to protect and preserve our natural resources while at the same time maintain access for recreation and tourism. And all Colorado communities, indeed, strive to provide quality education to young people.

But the ability of school districts to provide that quality education depends on where they sit. Below we discuss three different geographic areas of the state that highlight some specific concerns brought about through Colorado's diversity:

The Eastern Plains: A generation ago, the Eastern Plains – always considered a rural region of the state with wide-open spaces between farms and ranches – were well represented in the political process in Denver. This is no longer the case. Statewide there are just a handful of legislators that are truly “rural.” And nowhere in Colorado is the sense of hopelessness and neglect more apparent than the Eastern Plains (defined here as everything east of I-25 running north to south). Years of drought early in this century, loss of water rights to Kansas, and declining population have decimated this area. And in some ways it seems the rest of the state has ignored the Plains. There is no evidence of a coordinated state plan of

any type to address problems and come up with solutions. One superintendent sadly noted, "We can have all kinds of reform measures out of Washington D.C. and Denver, but what we need most are jobs with benefits." There is a real sense of quiet hopelessness here.

Southern Colorado: The southern part of the state also suffers from decades of neglect and indifference from the rest of the state. The region includes everything south of U.S. 50 from east to west with three distinct areas: Southeastern Colorado, the Arkansas Valley and Southwestern Colorado. Many of the lowest per-capita incomes are to be found in Southern Colorado, including Conejos, Costilla and Crowley counties. Once proud communities that had a mild resurgence in the 1970s are now withering on the vine. As on the Eastern Plains, the feeling of disenfranchisement from Denver and loss of hope is palpable in Southern Colorado. Due to the recent economic downturn many of Colorado's Southern communities are truly in survival mode.

One option to help both the Eastern Plains and Southern Colorado could be developed and managed through the proposed Rural Council: the governor, legislature, commission on higher education, and department of education should develop a task force with the Colorado Municipal League, the Colorado Counties Group and the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry to develop a long-range plan to address the lack of jobs and industry and bleak economic conditions on the Eastern Plains and in Southern Colorado. In addition to participating on the task force, the department of education should increase its presence and assistance to rural districts in these regions, particularly through the regional services office. In collaboration with CDE, statewide organizations such as the Colorado Association of School Executives and the Colorado Association of School Boards need to deliver services. Additionally, a regional cooperative aimed at studying student achievement and closing the achievement gap should be piloted in at least one rural district in each of these regions.

Western Slope

Compared to the Eastern Plains and Southern Colorado, the Western Slope (everything west of the Continental Divide) looks prosperous. Over the last two decades ski areas have expanded, bringing jobs and tax revenue, and the oil, gas and mining industries have also added employers and, more important, jobs with benefits. Most Western Slope communities have a degree of stability in municipal leadership that is not present in other rural areas in Colorado. As far as the school districts are concerned, nowhere in the state did we find superintendents so keenly aware of what they need to close the achievement gap and move forward on reforms and implementing best practices. Unsurprisingly, their solutions require money that is not currently available.

Superintendents in seven districts in the Northwestern part of the state have identified a key area where they would like assistance toward closing the achievement gap and initiating reform. The superintendents there would like to implement a five-year pilot program in their districts that will provide funds for full-day kindergarten, preschool and extended learning in the summer for at-risk students. Data collected and analyzed from the pilot program should be compared to other state programs and be one of a handful of possible models for the state.

Conclusion

The concerns and problems facing rural school districts present a challenge not just for the Colorado Department of Education but for all government and education leaders in the state to devise new strategies and solutions to increase student achievement and ensure that all students in Colorado have equal access to high-quality education. Improving communication and strengthening personal relationships between rural districts and CDE are a must. Good and committed people are working in an unwieldy and complex system that needs to be streamlined in order to better serve the rural constituency. A review and possible restructuring of both the BOCES organizations and Administrative Units should be undertaken to find ways to strengthen partnerships and to empower change toward a more effective and efficient system. Colorado has a new governor and will soon have a new commissioner of education. Capitalize on this opportunity to revitalize the department to reclaim rural school districts.

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APPENDIX

Superintendent INTERVIEW

Name _____ School District _____

1. What are your impressions of CDE and its role in the state?
2. Are CDE services to rural districts better or worse than they were five years ago?
3. Do you have an "achievement gap" in your district? If yes, can you describe it?
4. How could CDE help you with closing the achievement gap?
5. What are the most important tasks or responsibilities that a rural superintendent/BOCES director does not have the capacity/manpower to do?
6. What would assistance from CDE look like to you?
7. What are your greatest needs for improving student achievement?
8. Do you have a staff retention problem? Do you know the reasons?
9. Do you have cooperative agreements with other school districts? If yes, what is the purpose of the agreements and do they work?
10. Do you have cooperative agreements with city and county governments?
11. How do you handle English language learner services?
12. Do you have the workforce necessary to apply for competitive grants?
13. How do you provide professional development?
14. What do you lack in online/technological resources?
15. Is declining enrollment a problem for you? If yes, how so?
16. What are the two biggest things CDE could do to assist your district?
17. Is there a question we should have asked or any other insights that you might provide to us?

Board Member QUESTIONS

Name _____ School District _____

1. What are your impressions of CDE and its role in the state?
2. What are the biggest challenges you face as a rural district?
3. What are the biggest opportunities?
4. What cooperative agreements do you have with other school districts?
5. Are there other cooperative agreements that you would like to develop?
6. Do you have cooperative agreements with city and county governments?
7. What are the biggest obstacles to developing cooperative agreements?
8. Do you have declining enrollment? If yes, explain the effects.
9. What are the two biggest things that CDE could do to assist your district?
10. Is there a question we should have asked or any other insights that you might provide to us?