



The Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University

Providing principals partners for professional growth in
rural North Carolina

Rural districts in the United States have their own unique challenges and typically do not have the same capacity as urban districts do to address issues of principal development. Although the voice of rural America is often lost in the media's focus on the significant achievement gaps in large urban districts, the reality is that more than one-third of the schools in the United States are in small rural communities, and approximately 9.6 million students—or 20 percent of the U.S. student population—are educated in rural schools.¹

The percentage of rural schools across states varies widely, from as low as 6.6 percent in Massachusetts to 78.6 percent in North Dakota, with the majority of rural schools clustered in just 16 states.² This concentration may be one reason that rural issues receive less attention than urban ones. Despite conventional wisdom, rural schools are becoming increasingly diverse socioeconomically and ethnically, with rural students of color becoming less racially isolated. Jerry Johnson, co-author of “Why Rural Matters 2011-12,”³ indicates that more than 69 percent of rural students of color attend schools in states where they surprisingly comprise one-third of the rural student enrollment.⁴

Often, rural schools are isolated by distance and geography from major academic institutions that are involved in teacher preparation or leadership development. Access to professional-development opportunities and collaboration with like school leaders is challenged by economic constraints and travel limitations. Small rural districts have minimal staffing at the district level and few administrators at the building level to share the expanding responsibilities required by state policy in implementing elaborate teacher- and leader-evaluation systems. For example, a rural school district might have a superintendent, a finance director, some clerical staff, and if fortunate, perhaps a director of instruction. A school building might just have a principal and clerical staff with no assistant principals to share in the observation and feedback process. The superintendent may be the only individual to provide support and feedback to the principals in a rural district.

Indeed, the selection and recruitment of teachers and principals is challenging in remote rural districts. Often, the leadership in a district has a historical presence in the community, which can be complicated by local politics and traditional norms. If one thinks change is challenging in large urban districts, the obstacles to reform in small rural communities with limited staffing, resources, and strong community political influence can seem insurmountable.

Funded by more than \$6.2 million in federal Race to the Top funds, the Northeast Leadership Academy, or NELA, is the only federally funded project of the U.S. Department of Education that is focused exclusively on rural schools. Inspired by the isolation and limited access to resources and training, North Carolina State University developed a school-leadership program designed to support the challenges faced by these schools. The program, directed by Bonnie Fusarelli, serves 13 local school districts in the northeast region of North Carolina, a state where rural schools serve 47.2 percent of students.⁵ Challenging obstacles existed in navigating all of the necessary agreements to serve the selected communities, but those barriers have been largely overcome with the success of the program. In fall 2013, funding for the program was renewed, and North Carolina State University launched NELA 2.0. In addition to the 13 districts that met funding guidelines, several other partner districts are funding fellows, which is a direct reflection of the program's popularity.⁶

Table 1 below depicts the demographics and achievement gaps for the 13 school districts involved in the project. According to a grant narrative co-authored by Fusarelli, "The 13 districts that comprise the northeast quadrant of North Carolina suffer from issues related to abject, inter-generational poverty, and racial segregation. North Carolina's lowest performing schools are disproportionately clustered in this region."⁷

TABLE 1
Partner districts

Partner District & Total # of Students	Student Ethnicity	Student Poverty Rate	% Not Fully Licensed Teachers	Avg. Teacher Turnover Rate	Principal Turnover Rate	# Schools in Improve- ment/# of Schools	% Proficient on End of Grade Test Reading /Math	
Bertie 2,768	15% White; 82% Black; 2% Hispanic; 1% American Indian	87%	15.4%	21%	25%	3/9	57.3	75.75
Edgecombe 6,561	33% White; 57% Black; 8% Hispanic; 2% Other	81%	4.3%	19%	20%	9/15	49.4	67.4
Franklin 8,551	51% White; 31% Black; 14% Hispanic; 4% Other	61%	4.3%	14%	14%	3/16	71.4	82.7
Halifax 3,410	5% White; 86% Black; 3% Hispanic; 6% Native American	92%	12.3%	32%	36%	9/11	38.6	51.8
Hertford 3,302	16% White; 80% Black; 2% Hispanic; 1% American Indian; 1% Asian	24%	5.6%	12%	14%	2/7	51.3	71
Martin 3,441	44% White; 49% Black; 5% Hispanic; 1% Asian; 1% Other	70%	2.3%	15%	9%	5/11	69	76.4
Nash-Rocky Mt. 16,152	35% White; 49% Black; 10% Hispanic; 1% American Indian; 1% Asian; 4% Other	68%	2.6%	15%	33%	11/27	65.0	75.8
Northampton 2,255	16% White; 80% Black; 3% Hispanic; 1% Other	86%	11.7%	23%	0%	2/8	51.7	71.2
Roanoke Rapids 3,059	69% White; 23% Black; 4% Hispanic; 1% American Indian; 2% Asian; 1% Other	59%	1.3%	11%	0%	1/4	65	80.1
Vance 6,979	22% White; 62% Black; 13% Hispanic; 1% Asian; 2% Other	28%	8.4%	21%	13%	3/16	57	73.4
Warren 2,374	18% White; 66% Black; 6% Hispanic; 7% American Indian; 3% Other	84%	13.6%	0%	14%	2/8	56.2	68.3
Washington 1,809	21% White; 71% Black; 7% Hispanic; 1% Other	90%	6.3%	28%	25%	1/5	48.6	62.2
Weldon City 1,088	3% White; 94% Black; 1% Asian; 2% Other	79%	23%	28%	0%	2/4	46.2	64.5

Source: B. Fusarelli and L. Fusarelli, "The Northeast Leadership Academy 2.0. USDOE school leadership program" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Received via personal communication from Bonnie Fusarelli, director of and principal investigator for the Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University, December 12, 2013.

It is clearly evident from the profiles provided in the grant application⁸ that the demographic diversity, socioeconomic issues, and achievement dilemmas of rural districts rival or exceed the concerns of large urban districts in many of the districts served by the program. Furthermore, rural districts tend to show fairly high principal turnover rates or no turnover at all, both signaling environments where reform would be challenging.

There is a wide range of diversity within the 13 districts in the project, but all have areas of growth regarding student achievement.⁹ State policy initiatives, such as the Teacher Evaluation Process and the Leader Evaluation Process initiated with the North Carolina Race to the Top grant application, have created a greater sense of urgency to provide high-quality leadership training to all districts, including those in remote areas of the state.

Key components of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process are detailed in the case study within this report on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The demands of the system on principal time, and the instructional expertise needed by school leaders, have been tested by the new system. Depending on the contract status of teachers in a given school building, principals could be required to have up to nine interactions with teachers during license renewal or as few as five interactions for a career-status teacher not in the license-renewal year. Teachers are evaluated on five standards plus a sixth standard based on student-achievement outcomes. If a building has a lone principal and a high concentration of either probationary or career teachers up for license renewal, the number of observations and conferences can be daunting.

Another dilemma that rural schools face is the lack of a teacher pipeline; it does little good to fire a low-performing teacher if there is no one in the pipeline to take his or her place. Therefore, training on high-level observation and feedback strategies becomes even more critical for principals in rural schools.¹⁰ The NELA program has a component for supporting practicing principals as their instructional-leadership responsibilities increase, as well as a pipeline component to prepare future principals.

The pipeline portion of the NELA program reflects recommendations from reform literature regarding how principals should be prepared for challenging school environments. With a strong focus on real problems of practice and an aligned set of strategic actions backed by research, the fellows are able to immediately put into practice new content that is learned. Key components include careful selection of fellows, rigorous program design, and viable authentic experience in the schools where the fellows will serve. The preparation program is a two-year commitment, with the second year consisting of an embedded residency in the community and at a selected school in the program partner district. The multistep recruitment process includes an experiential component where candidates must perform tasks to show they have the competencies, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in the program. The next stage incorporates a variety of

diagnostic assessments, including feedback from mentor principals, so that action steps and the curriculum can be individualized to leverage strengths and improve weak areas of performance for each candidate.¹¹

Course work and experiences are organized into clinical rotations so the candidates experience leadership at the central office and at all grade levels of the school district. Candidates are expected to organize and provide professional development for teachers in the district and to help write grant applications for areas of instruction or operation where resources are lacking. In the summer prior to the residency year, fellows are required to participate in a full-time internship in a community organization related to the schools—this could be a church, a nonprofit organization, or a recreation center. The purpose of this internship is to provide the candidate with an opportunity to understand and connect with the community prior to working in the schools and to develop a vision for school-community collaboration. As one graduate stated on the website video, “In northeast North Carolina, the community is everything.”¹²

During the residency year, candidates are supported by mentor principals and executive coaches, often retired principals and superintendents with successful track records in challenging schools. Moreover, there are a variety of boot-camp-type trainings that take place beyond the prescribed coursework. Once candidates have graduated and entered the profession, they receive continued support and networking opportunities with other program graduates.¹³ The NELA leader-preparation program has successfully placed 90 percent of its graduates in leadership positions. For fellows in the class of 2012, six were named principals after only one year as an assistant principal. The future would appear to hold even more opportunity for NELA graduates, as more than 50 percent of the existing principals in the partnership districts are eligible for retirement in the next four years.¹⁴

The component of the NELA program that supports practicing principals is referred to as the Distinguished Leadership in Practice Program, or DLP. This program is supported through a partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals’ Association. During the residency year, mentor principals and fellows go through modified training modules so they are on the same page with common language and up-to-date strategies. The content supports the performance standards outlined in the North Carolina Leader Evaluation Process. DLP participants study models of excellence for school leadership and perform projects that are selected to help the achievement and management challenges of their individual schools.¹⁵ The training is delivered in cohorts and uses a blended format with live sessions as well as online and small-group meetings. The flexible format is useful in overcoming travel obstacles for principals in remote rural areas. The program lasts for a year, and session topics include:

- Component 1: Strategic leadership for high-performing schools
- Component 2: Maximizing human resources for goal accomplishment
- Component 3: Building a collaborative culture through distributive leadership
- Component 4: Improving teaching and learning for high-performing schools
- Component 5: Creating a strong student and external stakeholder focus
- Component 6: Leading change to drive continuous improvement¹⁶

Many of the topics are strategic and focused on collaboration, teamwork, and the development of improvement processes. NELA utilizes this professional-development model for both the fellows in the program and their mentor principals in order to standardize current information about best practices for school leadership.¹⁷

With the recent funding of NELA 2.0, the program has expanded professional development to include a principal academy for 100 leaders of high-need schools related to improving instruction through digital learning. Academy participants will receive coaching for implementing projects they design in the program.¹⁸

There are urgent reasons to pay attention to rural school districts in our country. However, advocacy for this segment of public education is not sufficiently prominent in the national dialogue of reform. If all students truly deserve great school leaders, then the policy landscape must address the inequities and achievement gaps in rural schools. North Carolina Superior Court Judge Howard E. Manning Jr., who presided over the case *Leandro vs. State of North Carolina*,¹⁹ found that the schools in northeast North Carolina were “failing to provide the children with the equal opportunity to receive a sound basic education” and said the schools were guilty of “academic genocide.”²⁰ Justice Manning was advocating for state takeover of the Halifax County school system, which is now participating in NELA in order to engage in focused school improvement. The Northeast Leadership Academy provides an example that can inform other districts around the country as they seek to improve educational equity for all students.

Endnotes

- 1 Marty Strange and others, "Why Rural Matters 2011-12: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States" (Washington: The Rural School and Community Trust, 2012), available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED528634.pdf>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The Rural School and Community Trust, "Why Rural Matters 2011-12: Statistical Indicators of the Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States," Press release, January 10, 2012, available at <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2820>.
- 5 B. Fusarelli and L. Fusarelli, "The Northeast Leadership Academy 2.0. USDOE school leadership program" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Received via personal communication from Bonnie Fusarelli, director of and principal investigator for the Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University, December 12, 2013.
- 6 Personal communication from Bonnie Fusarelli, director of and principal investigator for the Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University, January 6, 2013.
- 7 Fusarelli and Fusarelli, "The Northeast Leadership Academy 2.0. USDOE school leadership program."
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Northeast Leadership Academy, "Excellent Leaders. Effective Schools. Enriched Communities," available at <http://nela2.wordpress.ncsu.edu/innovative-leaders-academy/application-process/> (last accessed June 2014). Received via personal communication from Bonnie Fusarelli, Director of Northeast Leadership Academy, December 12, 2013.
- 10 Bonnie Fusarelli, phone interview with authors, December 12, 2013.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Northeast Leadership Academy, "Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA)," available at <https://ncsunela.wikispaces.com/NELA+Home> (last accessed January 2014).
- 13 Northeast Leadership Academy, "Excellent Leaders. Effective Schools. Enriched Communities."
- 14 NELA 2.0, "About NELA 2.0," available at <http://nela2.wordpress.ncsu.edu/about-nela-2-0/> (last accessed January 2014).
- 15 North Carolina Principals & Assistant Principals' Association, "Distinguished Leadership in Practice," available at <http://www.ncpapa.org/dlp.html> (last accessed January 2014).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Fusarelli, phone interview with authors.
- 18 NELA 2.0, "About NELA 2.0."
- 19 *Leandro v. State*, 346 N.C. 336 (1997).
- 20 Todd Silberman, "Judge issues school directive," *Raleigh News & Observer*, March 4, 2006, available at <http://www.newsobserver.com/2006/03/04/43155/judge-issues-schools-directive.html>.