

Rural Turnaround: Challenges and Opportunities

Amargosa Valley School could be considered representative of almost any preK–8 school that serves a large proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students and is focused on turning around persistently low achievement. Like other schools supported by federal School Improvement Grants, Amargosa is beginning to implement a reform plan toward what they hope will be dramatic improvement. But as a rural school, Amargosa has particular challenges and strengths that set it apart.

Step just outside the doors of Amargosa Valley School and the view is starkly different than anything you would see from an urban or suburban school. Amargosa is in the midst of a desert. It is not merely rural, it is *remote*. The valley has little more than a sheriff's office, community center, and graveyard. There are no students' homes nearby—no one lives close enough to walk to school. Located in Nye County, Nevada, one of the largest geographic counties in the United States, Amargosa's school district is spread over an area so vast (nearly twice the square mileage of New Hampshire) that a fleet of 100 buses must travel more than 1.3 million miles each year to serve the district's 18 schools.


The Journeys Project of WestEd's national Center on School Turnaround (CST) is documenting Amargosa's story in order to capture lessons of turnaround efforts, from the early stages through implementation. In Amargosa's case, the project also highlights issues that may be unique to rural schools. Across the country, rural schools tend to perform on par with urban and suburban schools, but this broad similarity belies significant underlying differences.

Bringing the research to life

The CST's Journeys Project documents some of the very concrete challenges of turnaround, including how these challenges are tied to the specifics of place. "The schools we are following may or may not be successful in their turnaround efforts," says WestEd's Sylvie Hale, who directs the project. "We hope they will be, but we don't know in advance. We're on the journey with them." Following each story as it unfolds, the project team chronicles issues in periodic episodes posted online, and produces webinars and shares relevant research in a blog. The team invites comments from practitioners, researchers, and the general public in order to engage in a dialogue about the turnaround process.

The CST also has administered a questionnaire to senior staff from 13 state education agencies about implementation of turnaround strategies in rural schools and has conducted a review of research literature on rural school improvement. A CST handbook, *The State Role in School Turnaround*:

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Emerging Best Practices, captures results from this survey and the literature review in a chapter on “Building Rural District Capacity for Turnaround.”

Most rural districts, like Amargosa, are small in population and large in geographic area. The handbook chapter notes that a smaller population can mean smaller classes or schools, and smaller districts tend to outperform larger ones. Yet, being spread over a large area may limit the district’s capacity to manage turnaround efforts because staff must travel so far to reach each school.

Even though Nye County has enough schools to warrant a district office, recent budget cuts resulted in a smaller staff responsible for covering the same 18,000 square miles. Fortunately for Amargosa, its federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) has provided resources for hiring a School Improvement Director to work exclusively to support Amargosa’s turnaround effort. But most rural schools don’t have this luxury.


Limited human capital

One of the biggest challenges in rural districts, noted in the literature and in the CST survey results, is limited human capital. Recruiting new administrators and teachers can be difficult, and staff turnover can have an immediate ripple effect in a small community. Any SIG recipient must follow a particular model for improvement. All three SIG models that schools can choose from require replacing the school’s principal; some require replacing a majority of the staff. In remote communities that already struggle to attract teachers and administrators, this approach is usually neither possible nor desirable.

According to WestEd’s Heather Mattson, who coordinates the Journeys content team, Amargosa chose a SIG model that doesn’t require replacing teachers: “Being a rural school, they thought it might be too difficult to hire,” she explains. “But, by the summer before they started to implement the grant, more than half of their teachers had left anyway.” The resulting need for recruitment posed a serious challenge. The school had just eight weeks to fill 8 of its 14 certified positions, including the critical positions of counselor, reading specialist, and special education teacher.

It was particularly difficult to recruit and hire a new principal. The district attempted a nationwide search, but ended up with very few candidates from outside the local area. District leaders felt fortunate that they were able to hire a strong candidate nonetheless. Robert Williams was a Teacher on Special Assignment who had recently been managing the school after the principal was reassigned. Williams was tapped for his in-depth knowledge of the school and its turnaround plan and because he was considered “a leader with a lot of potential,” according to the district’s superintendent.

To help address rural schools’ staffing needs, many state education agencies (SEAs) provide support in the form of career fairs, access to alternatively certified teachers, and strategic partnerships. Rural schools and districts also may offer bonuses, additional pay, or travel expenses to attract candidates. Perhaps most importantly, rural schools and districts are trying to create an environment where enthusiastic, committed, and effective teachers and leaders want to be. As noted in the handbook, “An environment of success and collaboration is attractive to potential recruits.” Williams has used this strategy to recruit teachers, telling potential hires that the work will be challenging but that Amargosa has a multiyear, comprehensive plan for helping students learn and thrive.



In addition to addressing staffing challenges, low-achieving schools must focus on improving teaching practices, which requires providing access to professional development and opportunities to collaborate and share resources. This, too, can be a challenge in rural communities where the teaching staff is smaller (often one teacher per grade level) and professional development opportunities are limited because education service providers are often far away, resulting in considerable travel time and costs.

The sheer distance between Amargosa and other schools has created large challenges for networking and connecting with potential sources of support such as grade-level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Amargosa's plan for conducting a PLC with a "nearby" school (over 50 miles away) via an online software program ran into major problems. As soon as teachers logged on to the program, it slowed to a halt—the school simply did not have enough internet bandwidth. The school and district have since solved this problem, but it temporarily delayed effective group conversations.

The CST handbook chapter discusses how SEAs can assist rural schools with recruitment and retention of staff and access to professional development. Some SEAs gather groups of rural districts together for shared professional development and collaboration, for example, or offer technological support to share resources and knowledge across remote areas.

Strength from within

In the face of significant challenges, a rural school may have to rely "more heavily on its own resources and ingenuity to drive its improvement than elsewhere," according to the CST handbook chapter, which notes that people are at the heart of rural communities, schools, and districts. The strength and commitment of local community members in a rural area can provide one of the biggest boosts to school turnaround efforts. There are likely to be strong connections and ample opportunities for interaction among staff, parents, and community members, which can provide important support to a school. The local school board is likely to pay close attention to its schools, and a rural school is often a community gathering place and "point of pride for the community," according to the CST handbook. The community's investment and commitment can help tremendously to support student motivation and success.

Sam Redding, Associate Director of the CST and coauthor of the handbook chapter on rural turnaround, has written of Amargosa: "Don't count out the gritty folks in this community. On one side of the ledger are the factors weighing against a small, remote school with a high mobility rate. On the other side are strong and committed school people and a community that will applaud their candid appraisal of what needs to be done for kids and their bold actions in making it happen.... This is a turnaround journey worth watching, and we will all learn from the trip."

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