Surprising Strengths and Big Needs:
Rural District Implementation of Common Core State Standards

Section 1: Paper Introduction/Overview

When California adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, Dr. Michael Kirst, President of the State Board of Education, noted that it would "change almost everything"—what teachers teach, how they teach, and what students are expected to learn. It was an ambitious undertaking with limited historical precedent in California.

While all school districts have faced obstacles in their efforts to implement CCSS, these challenges may be exacerbated in under-resourced, small and/or isolated districts. The purpose of this paper is to assess whether rural districts in California face unique challenges to implement due to their size and location. Do capacity limitations related to central office staffing, budget, and geography limit their ability to provide comprehensive support for principals and teachers? Do rural districts have access to the same kinds of support services of the average district? Are rural districts limited by size and sparseness of services? Are the implementation challenges of rural districts sufficiently different from those of suburban and urban district to require special attention?

Section 2: RPLN District Introduction/Overview

While it is widely understood that urban schools face specific challenges, lesser known, but also critical, are the struggles underway in rural schools across our state and nation. In 2015, Pivot Learning, with the support of the S.H. Cowell and Hewlett Foundations, established the Rural Professional Learning Network (RPLN). The RPLN project seeks to significantly alleviate these local capacity and statewide infrastructure issues by establishing a network of rural districts, that leverages both in-person meetings and virtual collaboration tools. As a part of this network structure, education leaders identify their core implementation challenges (problems of practice or POPs) and develop and share solutions. Through this model, counties and districts identify, employ and disseminate best practices in CCSS, ELA/ELD and NGSS implementation. This paper is based on data collection from nine districts that participated in the first year of the RPLN project. See these districts below:

Biggs USD	Butte	K-8	540	38% Hispanic, 56% Caucasian, 14% ELL, 20% FRPM
Durham USD	Butte	K-8	960	21% Hispanic, 74% Caucasian, 11% ELL, 40% FRPM
Grass Valley SD	Nevada	K-8	1,733	15% Hispanic, 73% Caucasian 6% ELL, 56% FRPM
Manzanita ESD	Butte	K-8	284	36% Hispanic, 51% Caucasian 14% ELL, 46% FRPM
Nevada Joint UHSD	Nevada	9-12	3,003	9% Hispanic, 84% Caucasian 2% ELL, 32% FRPM
Paradise USD	Butte	K-12	4,265	12% Hispanic, 77% Caucasian 2% ELL, 61% FRPM

Penn Valley UESD	Nevada	K-8	717	10% Hispanic, 80% Caucasian 4% ELL, 50% FRPM
Sebastopol UESD	Sonoma	K-8	898	26% Hispanic, 64% Caucasian 13% ELL, 36% FRPM
Willows USD	Glenn	K-12	1,443	50% Hispanic, 39% Caucasian 24% ELL, 64% FRPM

Section 4: CCSS Implementation and Technology Readiness Assessment Methodology and Findings

The Rural Professional Learning Network project began with a CCSS Implementation and Technology Readiness Assessment. These assessments included surveys, interviews, and a review of other data around the level of and capacity for implementation of Common Core State Standards with each network district and the technological capacity of each district to support CCSS implementation. In addition, the Pivot team made multiple site visits to the participating districts and conducted of dozens of interviews and observations. The data revealed both surprising strengths and substantial needs.

1. Districts have stable leadership and teaching staffs with significant experience

Among teachers and principals in these rural districts, you see very little turnover, with over half of teachers remaining in the classroom for more than six years and almost half of school leaders staying in their roles for more than six years. In fact, 69% of teachers weren't only in the profession for many years, but they specifically worked at their school sites or districts for ten or more years. Superintendent positions weren't as stable, although somewhat more stable than what you see in suburban and urban districts.

Years of Experience	Percentage of Respondents
Teachers	
1-3	6%
4-5	10%
6-10	22%
11-20	28%
21+	9%
Principals	
1-3	3%
4-5	7%
6-10	17%
11-20	27%

2. These rural districts have a robust technology infrastructure.

Each of the districts completed a technology assessment. The purpose of the technology readiness assessment was twofold: 1) to determine whether technology infrastructure, planning, resources, and challenges were barriers for rural districts' implementation of CCSS, and 2) to identify potential areas of need for support of the districts' participation in our blended-model network. While there has been a lot of national attention, to the

absence of a technology infrastructure, particularly internet access and bandwidth in rural districts, these districts indicated that they have access to reliable technology to support CCSS implementation. About 80 percent of technology survey respondents used technology for continuous/blended learning, instructional support for CCSS, support for special needs populations, and assessment. This finding indicates that state efforts to both build and provide support for technology infrastructure throughout California, to support the CAASPP online assessment, have had a beneficial impact on these smaller districts.

3. **They have had difficulty identifying high quality instructional materials.**

Districts have shared frustration sifting through the large number of available resources, without support to effectively and efficiently identify the highest quality materials. Some of the districts are looking for math and language arts programs to adopt while others are still in the planning stages – "identifying key learning objectives." Others are seeking assessment instruments and standards to guide their curriculum implementation.

4. **Implementation of CCSS varies because of a lack of access to high quality supports**.

Both principals and teachers indicated that they lacked the professional development resources necessary to implement the new standards. While they did indicate access to the generic professional development with which most teachers are quite familiar, teachers and administrators also pointed to a lack of "highly trained intervention specialists and coaches" often found in larger and better resourced districts. Consistently, districts stated that they did not have the resources to provide this kind of support. They often rely on existing state and regional support providers, which may themselves lack the capability to provide ongoing support.

Section 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Small, rural districts often lack access to a support systems to guide CCSS implementation. Current state and local efforts to spur more intensive implementation of the new standards have often been disconnected with little or no follow up or continuity for districts. To provide this systemic support, we recommend the following:

1. *Redefine the State and Local Role for Instructional and Curricular Support with specific consideration to the needs of small and rural districts.* State policy makers need to address the matter of the state's capacity to provide systematic, sustained support for instructional improvement. The current structure of state support was created in the early years of the 20th century, and over the past 100 years has not changed. As noted at the beginning of this study, the problems of CCSS implementation are not unique to rural districts. The difference is that suburban and urban districts tend to have greater access to all kinds of supports, as compared to their rural district counterparts. County Offices are one logical source of support. However, they should not have to take on this challenge alone. Instead, we suggest a system of supports that would include County Offices, the California Department of

Education, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and a broad range of non-profit providers and other resources, including digital resources. In fact, given improvements to California's digital infrastructure, systems of support should naturally start to (or in some places, continue to) extend beyond geographical boundaries, ensuring access to and usage of open education resources (OER) and websites like EdReports.org, even in the most isolated districts.

2. *Ensure that all levels of the system are pursuing an aligned and systematic approach to CCSS implementation based on a common definition of best practices and differentiated to the needs of small and rural districts.* The overall perspective of teachers and most administrators is that CCSS implementation is somewhat idiosyncratic, lacking a systemic approach that ties curriculum goals, assessment, instructional materials and pedagogy. Teachers often find themselves isolated from their peers, with little guidance or support. Building on the first recommendation; the state, counties and other support providers should provide small and rural districts with access to relevant exemplars of systemic standards implementation. They should identify and differentiate the types of supports available to these districts; and work closely with districts to leverage technology to facilitate best practice sharing and support their schools to work together in teams to solve relevant problems of practice. They should also work together to support districts to select high-quality instructional materials, benchmark assessments and strategies for standards implementation

3. *Support rural districts and schools to think strategically about time and use it effectively.* While time for curriculum development—pacing guides, assessments, units and lesson plans for EL and math—is in short supply in most schools, districts indicated the need for more time for teachers to effectively collaborate with peers and administrators. These issues are particularly acute in small districts where leaders often take on multiple roles including superintendent, principal, etc. The state should incentivize the development and dissemination of novel approaches to the use of time to increase opportunities for teacher collaboration including alternative school schedules and years. It should also incentivize the development and dissemination of technology tools for teacher collaboration that also provide information on the nature and impact of the collaboration.

4. *Provide ongoing resources to small and rural districts to support teacher professional development that is differentiated to teacher and student need, is innovative in its delivery, and is measured to ensure impact.* As with other matters related to CCSS implementation, rural districts have limited resources for professional development or ability to measure the impact. The state and/or counties should give districts access to relevant exemplars of high quality standards implementation, including professional development. They should provide the ongoing resources necessary to target professional development at specific teachers based on their needs and the needs of their students. They should also have the resources necessary to measure the impact on both teacher practice and student learning.