RSA PARTICIPATES IN EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES STUDY

Years of state aid cuts. Local property tax levy cap. Staffing cuts. The result? A curriculum that has become progressively narrower. There’s never been any question that our rural schools do what we do very well. Collectively, we have a high graduation rate, we have solid, personal relationships with our students and we engage our communities to maximize what we provide our kids. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have problems!

Teen alcohol abuse, pregnancy rates and heroin use are all higher than you would expect for communities that know the vast majority of their children. Sadly, as they faced reduced revenue, school districts cut back on extracurricular activities, then electives and advanced placement courses and finally (sometimes) core foundational courses.

Now, with the economy on the rebound, RSA has teamed up with partners in the educational and academic community to create recommendations for improving school-community partnerships that expand learning opportunities for students. The central premise of this Ford Foundation-sponsored research is that school districts can partner with community based organizations to create programs for after school, weekends and summer. Schools can become community centers that not only address the academic needs of students, but improve the quality of life of their families as well. Depending on the community need, this may involve school based health, dental or mental health care, as well as academic enrichment programs and social services. The result? An education that can be put into context and used as an effective foundation for college or career.

As the Learning Community (as the study partners are called) delved into the possibilities though, the challenges for rural schools kept coming to the fore. Yes, it’s a good thing to have after school programs, but while urban students can simply ride a later public bus home, transportation in rural communities is a challenge and state rules on transportation aid are limiting. Yes, it’s good for the schools to partner with local YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs and the like, except that rural communities often don’t have them. And it’s wonderful to devote a staff member to writing grants to secure needed state funds for programs, but rural schools don’t have the extra staff to assign to that work.

Fred Frelow, Senior Program Officer at The Ford Foundation praises the work of RSA and other partners of the Statewide Learning Community at the release of the recommendations of the report “Expanding Learning Through School-Community Partnerships in New York State.”
According to RSA Executive Director David Little, “Fortunately, the Learning Community listened to the unique challenges facing rural schools and incorporated appropriate recommendations into the white paper that will be used by state officials to develop programs to promote school-community partnerships in New York State.”

Specifically, the rural recommendations are:

1. To ensure equity in rural schools, where traditional partners are unavailable, the state should encourage partnerships with county services, hospitals, community colleges, BOCES, or other schools. Allowance should be made in funding programs for schools without access to partners.

2. In rural districts, the state should allow directors to work with multiple sites if the district shows that a dedicated director at each site is not feasible.

3. Policymakers and state agencies should evaluate funding for rural schools, including eliminating barriers to rural schools in applying for competitive grants, to ensure equity and the ability of these schools to sustainably expand learning through school-community partnerships as desired. Read the report, recommendations for rural schools and a shorter, Executive Summary. www.nysan.org/learning-community.

The recommendations contained in the report are groundbreaking, addressing issues like summer learning loss and providing students a real life context in which to use classroom information. They provide a framework for bridging the gap between urban and rural students and their suburban neighbors. The state has already signaled its support for school-community partnerships and creating Community Schools. This report provides state leaders a template for building an effective statewide system of varied, expanded learning opportunities for students.

“This white paper should be a valuable resource to state policymakers and agencies as they seek to support school-community partnership models that promote student success. These approaches to expanding learning are beneficial across the state, and I am pleased that the learning community was able to provide significant recommendations to assist rural school districts in their efforts to expand learning for their youth." - Alli Lidie, Deputy Director

AfterSchool Works! NY: the New York State Afterschool Network (ASW:NYSAN)