



Rural school leaders stress the importance of leadership and relationships during COVID crisis

“Adversity doesn’t build character, it reveals it.”

That famous quote by Kentucky novelist James Lane Allen may have been inspired by his experiences as a principal. Nearly two centuries later – and the adversity COVID-19 brought to schools – also revealed the importance of leadership.

The Department of Educational Leadership seized the opportunity to use virtual technology to bring together rural school leaders in Kansas, Pennsylvania and Queensland, Australia to share challenges and successes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the remarkable differences between these communities – from the American Heartland to Appalachia to a coastal community near the Great Barrier Reef with a predominately Indigenous population – there were many commonalities.

All experienced challenges concerning students: engagement; struggling learners; technology; social-emotional and special education needs; and achieving trust, balance and buy-in with parents. There were also successes.

The “Collaborative Leadership Forum: Challenges and Successes of Leading Rural Schools During the Pandemic” featured two panels of school leaders that took place over Zoom in early July, which is winter in Queensland. The opportunity evolved after Hobart Harmon, K-State senior research associate and leader of strategic advancement at Appalachia Intermediate Unit 8 in Pennsylvania, returned from Queensland.

Harmon was invited to the Queensland University of Technology by Simone White, associate dean for international and engagement in the School (Faculty) of Education, where he spoke on innovations in rural education. While there, he also presented at the 35th national conference of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, or SPERA, Queensland, which was hosted by the university. Following the conference, Brian O’Neill, SPERA president, took Harmon on a week-long tour of rural schools.

After returning, Harmon began exploring how relationships established during the visit with leaders of rural education and Queensland state education officials could foster a collaborative sharing activity among Kansas, Pennsylvania and Queensland educators.

“Then along came COVID,” Harmon said. “Learning about leadership actions during this challenging time could be part of what makes rural places different, particularly since public schools in Queensland are state schools; there is no local school board or a district superintendent to provide leadership.”

Jerry Johnson, chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Lydia E. Skeen endowed professor, who has researched rural schools for more than two decades, recognized from conversations with Harmon how the pandemic could expose the value of highly qualified, intellectually nimble administrators.

“One of the concepts that came through so clearly in the panel sessions was the importance of leadership – not as a role, but as an activity that everyone can share in,” Johnson said. “I am so proud to be a faculty member in educational leadership because we’ve seen the strength and the power and the creativity in that work and what that means for children, families and communities.”

“You may look at COVID-19 as a challenge, but I look at the positives, and if one thing has really been highlighted, it’s the way we can use technology to overcome the tyranny of distance,” O’Neil said.

Student Internet access and availability of technology-enhanced learning devices and instructional resources were important factors as schools pivoted to online learning. Technology and innovation often went hand in hand in responding to the challenges of COVID-19.

Interestingly, one rural high school went old school with a touch of technology – and it was a hit. Joe Renzi was the lone administrator (superintendent and principal) of the 275-student K-12 Salisbury Elk-Lick School District when COVID-19 struck. The south-central Pennsylvania district’s “big win” was graduation.

“We were able to hold graduation outside on our baseball field,” Renzi said. “We borrowed a stage and bought big banner portraits of our 20 students and streamed it live on our Facebook page, which we’ve never done before. When it was all said and done, everybody liked everything we did so much – which we did out of necessity and trying to put a special touch to that necessity. Now, everybody wants to see that every year. Out of a tough situation came some special ideas.”

Johnson said rural leaders demonstrated creativity in leveraging their natural resources.

“Rural schools face unique challenges, but they possess unique assets too – unique strengths,” Johnson said. “How well we overcome those challenges and how successful we are depends in large part on leveraging those uniquely rural assets.”

One principal literally lured students to school.

Terri Byrne was the executive principal of the Mornington Island P-10 State School for Indigenous islanders in Australia’s Gulf of Carpentaria. The community was plagued with unreliable Internet access, health concerns, and poverty. Only 60 percent of students attended school before the pandemic.

“We set up a sunset activity,” Byrne said. “It was a fishing event where the kids could come down to the beach in the evenings and fish for a while – which they loved – and we could provide them some food to take home so at least we could touch base with those kids we weren’t seeing. There were teachers, teacher aides and volunteers from other organizations.”

While principal job descriptions are virtually the same, the multifaceted nature of the rural principals’ position added complexities.

Renzi’s experience was a great example. While his rural Pennsylvania district has since hired a high school principal, Renzi still serves as the superintendent, elementary principal, federal programs coordinator and technology director.

“The role of the rural principal is very different (compared) to the role of an urban principal,” O’Neill said. “Their role is so much beyond the curriculum leadership of the school. It’s very much a leader within the community, and there are a lot of unwritten expectations on the rural school principal.”

Despite the differences between these schools and their structures, a trend emerged.

“One of the outstanding things was the connection we’ve developed with families,” O’Neill said, as did many other principals. “So many have come back and said ‘I have a renewed appreciation from what you guys do.’”

Kansas Commissioner of Education Randy Watson participated in the two virtual panel sessions.

“You took this interesting time, made it operational and did it in a gracious way,” Watson said. “I was honored to listen to these stories.”

Allen Pratt, executive director of the National Rural Education Association, said no one could have foreseen the adversity of today’s COVID-19 pandemic and the intense challenges it presented. “But strong character and inspired leadership truly are being revealed as rural educators around the world work to meet those challenges and serve their students, wherever they may be,” Pratt said.

Johnson and Harmon acknowledge the need for more collaboration, innovation and research that can assist leaders in rural school settings. “And the collaboration needs to embrace the voices of local school leaders,” Johnson said.

With support from Debbie Mercer, dean of the College of Education, Johnson and Harmon are creating a video project with colleagues in Queensland that contains highlights from this international collaborative leadership project.

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– Allen Pratt