

# TEXAS RURAL SCHOOLS TASK FORCE REPORT

## Elevating Support for Texas Rural and Small Schools



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## Texas Rural Schools Task Force Report March 31, 2017

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## Texas Rural Schools Task Force: Executive Summary

The Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF) was formed at the request of Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, to identify current challenges and best practices for rural school districts statewide and develop recommendations for the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that would support rural schools and districts in overcoming obstacles and meeting the needs of Texas rural students. The Task Force identified four priority issues: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5/career and technical education (CTE) support, and grants and contracts. The recommendations for these issues, as well as some general recommendations, provide substantial leverage for supporting the pressing needs of rural schools and districts.



### Teacher Recruitment:

1. Encourage and support the implementation of “Grow Your Own” programs on high school campuses through a variety of means including the public service endorsement in high school career pathways, dual credit opportunities in education coursework, exploring the possibility of an Early College High School model, and other innovative initiatives.
2. Explore the potential for a centralized, online statewide job application and vacancy matching site.
3. Promote the profession of teaching as rewarding and impactful.
4. Encourage educator preparation programs to increase awareness of rural teaching opportunities.
5. Broaden the pool of potential teachers by exploring the potential for flexibility in certification to include non-certified but qualified personnel to teach CTE courses, for certified personnel to teach outside of their field, and for retired teachers to return to full-time teaching more easily.



### Teacher Retention:

6. Encourage the implementation of career pathways for teachers including leadership opportunities, differentiated compensation, and other opportunities for growth without leaving the classroom.



### House Bill 5/CTE Supports:

7. Provide financial incentives to foster collaborative efforts between and among local education agencies, institutions of higher education, the Texas Workforce Commission, and businesses through prioritization of Perkins reserve funds in CTE grants, business incentives, and other financial opportunities.
8. Increase the quality and accessibility of online learning, including the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN), by addressing misconceptions, facilitating aggressive marketing and outreach, removing financial disincentives, supporting greater bandwidth, implementing a longer grant cycle, and improving the teacher selection, training, and support model.



### Grants and Contracts:

9. Streamline the processes for grant applications and reporting documentation by improving awareness of eligibility (3-month calendaring), pre-populating data, and designating a certain percentage of competitive grant funds be prioritized for rural and small schools.

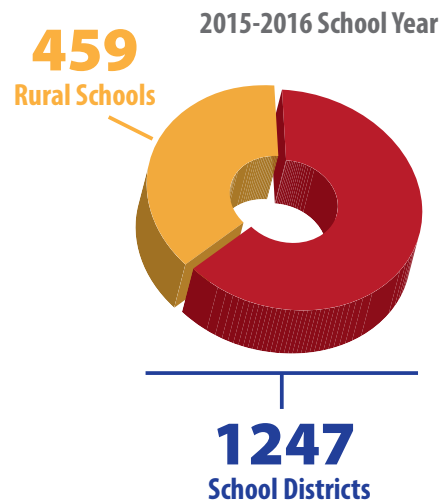


### **Rural Support in General:**

10. Continue to offer flexibility and support of local control (e.g., District of Innovation, T-TESS/T-P ESS) and explore ways for allowing more flexibility with regard to policies and compliance requirements.
11. Review the effects that policies, procedures, and processes have on rural schools by ensuring sufficient rural representation on the Commissioner’s Texas Association of School Administrators Cabinet of Superintendents and/or consider convening an annual or semi-annual “Rural Schools Commissioner’s Cabinet.”
12. Create ways to share best practices among rural schools across the state to foster the spread of innovation and achievement.

## Introduction

Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state in the United States. In the 2015-2016 school year, rural schools, as classified by TEA, accounted for 459 of the 1247 school districts in Texas, including charters, juvenile justice, and state schools for the deaf and blind or visually impaired. If independent towns and non-metropolitan areas are added to this number, a total of 730 of the 1247 districts would be included.



<http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/analyze/1516/gloss1516.html#Rural>

Teacher recruitment, teacher retention, educator and community isolation, and financial and human capital are a few of the many issues that Texas rural schools and districts face. While some of these issues are not exclusive to rural districts, rural districts contend with unique and nuanced obstacles. Texas rural districts know all too well the challenges they face and are implementing innovative promising practices to address them as best they can. Even so, operational and other limitations given the size, resources, and capacities of their schools and districts ultimately affect the students they serve.

In order to ensure ALL students in the state of Texas, particularly those in rural districts, have effective schools that equip them with the knowledge and skills to be successful in college, career, and life, it is essential that TEA recognize and differentiate support to meet the unique needs of rural school districts. When it comes to school districts in Texas, one size does not fit all.

The Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF) was formed at the request of Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, to identify current challenges and best practices for rural school districts statewide. The Task Force was also charged with developing recommendations for TEA that would support rural schools and districts in overcoming obstacles and meeting the needs of Texas rural students.

The Task Force identified four priority issues: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5/ career and technical education support, and grants and contracts<sup>1</sup>. Below are recommendations for these issues, as well as some general recommendations, all of which provide substantial leverage for supporting the pressing needs of rural schools and districts.

<sup>1</sup> Many issues were identified, particularly issues regarding the inequity of the funding formula and other funding related initiatives. The RSTF decided to focus on the efforts where TEA has locus of control and decision-making authority.

## Recommendations of the Texas Rural Schools Task Force (RSTF)

### Teacher Recruitment

The teacher shortage in Texas has been described as the “biggest threat” to public schools in the state (Aragon, 2016). The RSTF agreed that rural schools may feel this challenge more intensely than those in suburban or urban settings (Player, 2015). Issues such as the proximity to a larger or more urban community, the lack of available housing, social amenities, spousal employment opportunities, and the competitiveness of larger surrounding school districts all contribute to the difficulty in recruiting teachers, particularly for hard-to-staff positions. The RSTF recommends that TEA consider the following actions.



#### Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 1

***Encourage and support the implementation of “Grow Your Own” programs on high school campuses through a variety of means including the public service endorsement in high school career pathways, dual credit opportunities in education coursework, exploring the possibility of an Early College High School model and other innovative initiatives.***

House Bill 5 (HB 5), which established new graduation requirements for students in Texas, created five categories of career endorsements for students seeking a high school diploma. One of these pathways, the public services endorsement, includes education and training among its career clusters.

The RSTF reasons that implementing this recommendation would create interest in the education field among students prior to high school graduation. Mentoring students in their high school years by providing opportunities to serve as student coaches, teacher aides, or peer tutors for other students would provide them exposure to activities related to teaching and promote the positive aspects of teaching as a profession. Offering dual enrollment courses with community colleges could allow students to leave high school with college credit and possibly even an associate degree that could be transferred to a four-year university to support them in pursuit of a certification as a teacher.



“Grow Your Own” is an approach to supporting the education of local students and adults who are likely to stay in or return to a local community to teach. This approach is supported by studies that found strong positive relationships between the location of a teaching position and a teacher’s hometown, high school, or college (Beesley, et al., 2010).



In addition to the efforts of TEA, the RSTF notes that the Higher Education Coordinating Board, community colleges, and other institutions of higher education could also encourage the pursuit of such endorsements by collaborating with rural districts, creating associate degree programs, increasing flexibility in instructor requirements, and outlining courses that could be transferred to four-year universities.



### **Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 2**

***Explore the potential for a centralized, online statewide job application and vacancy matching site.***

A one-stop shop for both districts and educators should be created. It could include a common statewide application form to be completed by candidates with a place to upload a resume. Applicants could also indicate their preferences in terms of size, location, subject area, and other categories in which they are interested and search for positions that meet those preferences. Districts could then view the applications, using particular criteria matched to their needs or using it as a general search tool, increasing the number of potential applicants a district might contact, thus improving the efficiency of the recruitment process.

With the advent of online job search links such as CareerBuilder, Indeed, or Monster, more and more job seekers are looking to online databases and job search engines to make the process of finding and applying for a job easier or more efficient. Uploading a resume only once and completing an application that can be shared with multiple employers exposes the job seeker to a wider range of potential opportunities. Alaska has operated such a statewide clearinghouse, Alaska Teacher Placement, since 1978.

The RSTF noted that while there are some sites that offer lists of open positions in school districts (e.g., the Texas Association of School Administrators website, some individual regional education service center (ESC) websites, or the Texas Workforce Commission's WorkInTexas.com website, an applicant may need to search several or all of these to find a position in which he or she is interested. Districts may never know about or hear from applicants they are seeking.



### **Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 3**

***Promote the profession of teaching as rewarding and impactful.***

Promoting the teaching profession will help to unite all stakeholders (communities, parents/families, legislators, and business) around a common purpose to improve the image of Texas public schools and Texas teachers.

While the research data are mixed with regard to how teachers and teaching are perceived by the public (Ozimek, 2014; Sawchuk, 2014), many Texas schools and districts recognize and experience an attack and a lack of support for public education and the teaching profession, specifically in rural schools. This discourages and invalidates the work of those in the field. Similarly, it has a perceived effect on teacher recruitment, teacher retention, and family and community engagement, among other topics important to the success of schools and districts.

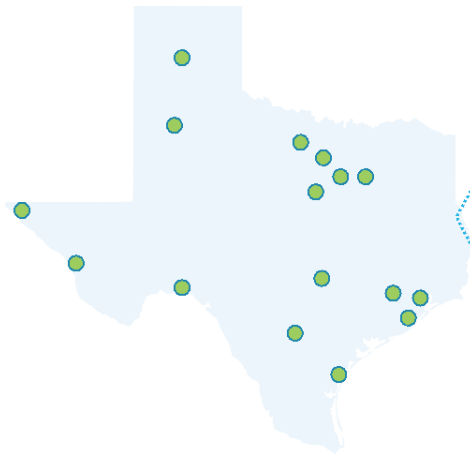
Through the aggressive use of public service announcements, billboards, websites and social media outlets, and other communication vehicles, the RSTF recommends that TEA promote the teaching profession.

#IAmTXEd is a social media campaign run by TEA to showcase the success stories of Texas teachers in the classroom through TEA's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts. According to a TEA press release on January 18, 2017,

Stories from the campaign will feature teachers providing rigorous and rewarding academic experiences; highlight the critical role that educators play in students' lives; showcase teachers driving student achievement, a love of learning and personal growth; and/or exhibit instances in which educators go above and beyond to provide meaningful learning experiences inside and outside the classroom.

Efforts like the #IAmTXEd are a step in right direction to help celebrate and validate public education in general and the educator profession specifically.

## #IAmTXEd: What Is #IAmTXEd?



A statewide social media campaign that collects and shares the **original stories** of Texas educators whose work is leading to **greater student outcomes and achievements**.

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### Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 4

***Encourage Educator Preparation Programs to increase awareness of rural teaching opportunities.***

Preparing teachers to meet the needs of rural learners is not a new issue nor one facing only districts in Texas. Although teacher recruitment is a real problem, teaching in rural contexts requires specific knowledge that could be developed through teacher preparation programs (Azano & Stewart, 2015; van Rensburg, Noble, & McIlveen, 2015; Barley & Brigham, 2008). Teacher candidates often know little about rural contexts, and teacher preparation programs have the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and promote the idea that teaching in a rural school can be both professionally and personally rewarding.

There is not one strategy recommended, but many by which educator preparation programs could prepare novice teachers and promote the choice of teaching in a rural school among its graduates. Requiring observation hours in a rural setting, offering student-teaching/residency opportunities in a rural setting, building awareness around loan forgiveness, hosting rural school job fairs, and inviting rural school superintendents to speak to classes about the benefits of a rural/small school district placement are some ways that educator preparation programs could both prepare and persuade teachers to consider teaching in a rural setting.



### **Teacher Recruitment – Recommendation 5**

***Broaden the pool of potential teachers by exploring the potential for flexibility in certification to include non-certified but qualified personnel to teach CTE courses, for certified personnel to teach outside of their field, and for retired teachers to return to full-time teaching more easily.***

The diminishing pool of candidates is a major challenge for rural schools and districts. There is not an abundance or even sufficient supply of teachers from which rural districts can recruit. When there are current certified teachers in a district who show interest and knowledge in a different subject or grade level certification, it would be beneficial to rural schools and districts to be able to utilize that person in the vacant teacher opening without having to pay for additional certification tests. Similarly, when considering CTE courses, there are industry professionals who could come into the classroom but may not have the time to go through the full process of educator preparation program certification. If a district is able to provide support and mentoring to these non-certified, but content qualified CTE industry teachers, and show their effectiveness, filling and offering CTE courses could be easier for rural schools and districts. Rural districts have so many challenges with staffing; it would be advantageous if flexibility in certification were given to help districts maximize their current human and community resources. Rural districts need flexibility, considering that there is not a single “best practice” to inform policy for rural schools (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).

Rural districts also need the flexibility to respond more quickly to changing needs. Although there are similarities among rural districts, each has individual needs to best serve their students and communities. A district may have a sudden influx of migrant or immigrant students, for example, that creates a unique situation the district may not be prepared to address. Losing a teacher during the middle of a school year to a long-term illness may create a situation where it is nearly impossible to replace that teacher. There are content areas such as math or science where few applicants are available to fill positions in the district. For these reasons, the RSTF recommends providing greater flexibility to rural districts in assigning staff to teach particular courses.

Retired teachers are another source of potential candidates. Many are willing and highly capable of continuing to contribute to the profession. This would provide opportunities for rural districts to hire an experienced, high-quality educator to fill a position in a high-need field or to replace a mid-year vacancy.

Currently, though, rules regarding rehiring a retired teacher requires most to wait at least one year after a break in employment that is covered by the TRS before returning to the classroom. Returning any sooner means that the teacher cannot receive monthly TRS checks unless they are working part-time or as a substitute. In addition, districts who hire retired teachers must contribute 14.5 percent of the teacher's salary to TRS (for the 2016-2017 school year) and pay TRS-Care (\$535 per month for 2016-2017) on behalf of the rehired retiree, unless the teacher retired prior to September 1, 2005 (Texas Classroom Teachers Association, 2016). The district is allowed to take these costs out of the salary of the teacher, but the district cannot reduce the salary below the state minimum salary schedule. For rural schools, who often can only offer the minimum salary, these costs create an insurmountable challenge for hiring a retired teacher. These suggestions would, however, require statutory changes to the TRS retirement regulations.

### **Teacher Retention**

A number of factors have been identified by the RSTF that influences a teachers' decisions to either leave the field or move to a teaching position at another school: limited personnel for mentoring and professional development, lack of opportunities for advancement, isolation of subject/grade peer groups, the multitude of responsibilities, and other challenges similar to that of teacher recruitment.

Rural school districts do what they can to address these issues. A number of potential strategies for retaining teachers, such as providing housing, creating and maintaining a positive culture that recognizes teachers and gives them voice, retention bonuses, and developing partnerships with neighboring districts to reduce isolation were all discussed by the RSTF and are supported by the literature (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Desoff, 2010; Lowe, 2006). It was determined however, that a high-leverage strategy was needed to address the lack of opportunities for teachers to advance in the profession and obtain salary increases without having to pursue administrative positions or leave to teach in a higher paying district. The RSTF recommendation mirrors this strategy.



### Teacher Retention – Recommendation 6

*Encourage the implementation of career pathways for teachers including leadership opportunities, differentiated compensation, and other opportunities for growth without leaving the classroom.*

Developing and implementing career pathways for teachers requires joint responsibility among the rural districts, regional ESCs, and TEA. Rural districts will need to identify potential areas for teacher leadership within their district, including positions such as lead teacher, peer instructional coach, technology leader, teacher mentor, campus improvement team leader, or other areas that will support improvement. Regional ESCs could create leadership or administration academies to increase teachers' skills in fulfilling these roles and principals' skills in distributing leadership on a campus.

#### **Benefits to career pathways for teachers include:**

- Teachers' skills and experience can be validated.
- Teachers may take greater ownership in the success of the district.
- Teachers can advance their careers and salaries without leaving the classroom.
- More instructional leaders will be created within the district.
- Teachers can take some of the administrative tasks from campus principals, allowing them to focus on instructional leadership.

TEA should provide flexibility or additional funding to local rural districts to help increase teacher salary for these additional duties and allow districts to provide incentives for a career path within a rural district.

## House Bill 5/CTE Supports



### House Bill 5/CTE Supports – Recommendation 7

***Provide financial incentives to foster collaborative efforts between and among LEAs, Institutions of Higher Education, the Texas Workforce Commission, and businesses through prioritization of Perkins reserve funds in CTE grants, business incentives, and other financial opportunities.***

The district requirements associated with HB 5 graduation requirements and career endorsements have exacerbated challenges for many rural school districts. In response to teacher shortages, rules governing certification of CTE teachers, the decline of businesses in their communities, and limitations on facilities and resources, the RSTF reasoned that if rural districts collaborate with neighboring districts they would be able to share the expenses of purchasing equipment and employing teachers to offer these courses. These collaborations are seen as a means for expanding course offerings for students in career and technology education.

Another opportunity to meet requirements for HB 5 and CTE courses in general is to partner with institutions of higher education, the Texas Workforce Commission, and businesses. A study conducted in Texas demonstrated that in order for business/school collaboration to succeed, there must be a reciprocal relationship that provides benefits to all parties involved. Business leaders have a vested interest in high-quality education in their communities and see the future of students as an important consideration. They are also concerned with return on investment (Badgett, 2016). Collaboration and partnerships between business and industry in the local community and the local school district can provide rural students expanded opportunities for learning skills in industry-related fields, while local businesses can be provided with a pipeline of local students as employees.

Another consideration would be to allow for additional flexibility in ADA funding for students taking courses after hours as well as during the school day. If schools were able to receive such funding for students taking courses through alternative methods and scheduling options, such as online courses or dual-credit during non-school hours, this would provide additional incentives for rural schools to promote such innovative strategies, for the ultimate benefit of students. These suggestions would, however, require statutory changes to ADA funding formulas.



### House Bill 5/CTE Supports – Recommendation 8

***Increase the quality and accessibility of online learning, including the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN), by addressing misconceptions, aggressive marketing and outreach, removing financial disincentives, supporting greater bandwidth, implementing a longer grant cycle, and improving the teacher selection, training, and support model.***

Implementing this recommendation would support the access and expansion of course offerings that are beneficial to schools and students. Rural schools would be able to expand access to rigorous AP and dual credit course work and HB 5 opportunities for Career and Technical Education courses by filling hard-to-staff subject areas without the need to hire additional personnel and bearing additional costs. It would also provide rural students the opportunity to access and pursue additional content they need to compete for jobs and entrance into higher education institutions.

Making TxVSN and other provider offerings more economical for small districts could level the playing field for rural students. For instance, the cost per course for TxVSN is more expensive than the cost of similar services offered by other third-party providers. This discourages the use of TxVSN. Similarly, there is an inverse cost incentive where districts pay more per course if the student passes the course and less if the student fails the course. Based on financials alone, this incentivizes failure.

Additionally, the funding structure for TxVSN restricts the amount of ADA funding a district receives for a student participating in TxVSN courses. Texas Education Code 30A.151-155 states that school districts can receive some ADA funding for a student enrolled in a TxVSN online course if the student is enrolled in three or fewer electronic courses during a school year or if the student is enrolled in a full-time online program. Districts do not receive ADA funding if the student is enrolled in more than three online courses in a school year and/or are not full-time online students. Additionally, districts are responsible for paying the TxVSN course fee for each course a student takes up to three courses. In some cases, course fees can be transferred to the student. Regardless, the restrictions on receiving ADA funding and paying fees for TxVSN courses take money away from an already tight rural district budget.



## Grants and Contracts



### Grants and Contracts – Recommendation 9

*Streamline the processes for grant applications and reporting documentation by improving awareness of eligibility (3-month calendaring), pre-populating data, and designating a certain percentage of competitive grant funds be prioritized for rural and small schools.*

Superintendents in small rural districts often play a number of roles. As in any district, the superintendent must oversee district finances, human resources, instructional support, and transportation, but a rural superintendent may more often times than not find himself or herself driving a bus route, distributing breakfast or lunch, or teaching classes when there is no substitute teacher available. The superintendent is still expected to attend community social activities, athletic competitions, and participate in local business groups. State reporting requirements also fall on the shoulders of the superintendent and are often even more daunting given the limited amount of staff to assist with these processes. With the many demands on their time, superintendents may not be aware of available grants and, even when they are aware, may not have available time or energy to develop a proposal or complete the required paperwork. Larger districts often have designated grant writing personnel or the funds available to hire grant writers, giving large districts an advantage over rural/small schools in competing for grant funds.

By streamlining the process of developing, submitting, monitoring, and evaluating proposals, TEA would be helping to “level the playing field” for rural and small districts that do not have dedicated grant writers.

Efficiencies, such as pre-populating grant application forms with required information would assist rural districts in completing proposals. With more applications from rural districts, competitive grants would have a broader pool of applicants.

To help equalize the distribution of available grant funds, the RSTF recommends grant notifications and opportunities be emailed directly to the districts that qualify for the grant. Additionally, the RSTF recommends that a competitive priority could be given for rural schools or a certain percentage of available funds could be set aside for rural and small districts.

## Rural Support in General



### Rural Support in General – Recommendation 10

*Continue to offer flexibility and support of local control (e.g., District of Innovation, T-TESS/T-PESS) and explore ways for allowing more flexibility with regard to policies and compliance requirements.*

As noted above, the unique and varied needs of rural districts in Texas require flexibility in decision making. One statewide solution does not fit all schools and districts. By allowing more local control over the policies and practices in rural schools, the RSTF believes there will be greater investment by all stakeholders in ensuring the success of the district.

The RSTF applauds the strides that TEA and the Texas Legislature has made in increasing flexibility for rural schools through the District of Innovation program and rules governing the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) and the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS). The RSTF recommends continuation of this flexibility and expansion of it to include other aspects of local policy. For example, greater flexibility in areas such as school calendars will allow rural districts to plan their academic years, schedules, and course offerings to coordinate with community colleges and business partners. This would help to increase opportunities for dual credit courses or student internships for Career and Technical Education.



### Rural Support in General – Recommendation 11

*Review the effects that policies, procedures, and processes have on rural schools by ensuring there is sufficient rural representation on the Commissioner’s TASA Cabinet of Superintendents and/or consider convening an annual or semi-annual “Rural Schools Commissioner’s Cabinet.”*

As noted in the reasoning and purposes for the RSTF, rules and policies that make sense for large, urban, or suburban school districts do not always translate to good policy for small, rural schools. Critiques of national education policy reveal that policy priorities often “do not sufficiently account for rural contexts” (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Soliciting ongoing input from rural schools about policies and procedures before implementation will help ensure the unique needs of rural schools are taken into account in decision-making.



### **Rural Support in General – Recommendation 12**

***Create ways to share best practices among rural schools across the state to foster the spread of innovation and achievement.***

In addition to the #IAmTXEd campaign described above, the RSTF proposes that TEA look for additional ways to support the sharing of best practices among rural districts. Media campaigns, newsletters, e-blasts, or other communication vehicles might be employed. The regional ESCs can play a role by providing opportunities to share promising practices by convening superintendents from their regions or across regions in meetings other than those for policy briefings or administrative issues. Associations dedicated to supporting rural schools can also design avenues for sharing ideas.

## **Conclusion**

The RSTF trusts that the TEA will consider and implement recommendations offered in this report. These RSTF recommendations provide the most leverage for addressing the pressing needs and issues faced in rural schools and communities. To promote collaboration and progress on these recommendations, the RSTF requests that there be a six-month follow up on all recommendations.

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## Appendix A: Task Force and Regional Forum Meetings

### Selection of Task Force Members:

The Rural Schools Task Force was formed intentionally with diversity as a foundation. Nominations and selection were prioritized based on indicators of district academic achievement, indicators of cost-effective operations, size of school district, and ethnicity and gender of the superintendent. Twenty (20) superintendents from across the state, one from each ESC region, were selected.

### Selection of Initial Issues to Study

Prior to the meeting of the Task Force, a superintendent survey disseminated through ESC directors asked superintendents to rank the issues most important in their school district. The issues included: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5, use of technology, 300-square mile rule, partnerships to leverage resources, Additional State Aid for Tax Reduction (ASATR), leadership pipelines, family and community engagement, and “other.” There were 430 survey respondents. The top 3 issues noted as important to rural schools and district were teacher recruitment, teacher retention, and House Bill 5.

### The Task Force and Regional Forum Meetings:

There were four (4) Task Force meetings and seven (7) regional forums that took place over six months. Each meeting and regional forum was planned by a team consisting of staff from TEA and TXCC.. Four ESC directors served as unofficial advisors to the planning team. Each meeting focused on specific objectives and was designed with interactive, hands-on activities to meet meeting outcomes.

**October 2016:** Task Force Meeting 1 focused on orienting the Task Force to their charge and narrowing and prioritizing topic areas important to rural schools and districts. Task Force members reviewed the results from the superintendent survey, expanded on the issues related to the survey topic areas, and engaged in a consensus building process to narrow and prioritize which topics the Task Force would address. The Task Force prioritized teacher recruitment and retention as their focus.

Between meetings 1 and 2, Task Force members were encouraged to engage other stakeholders in the conversation – in this case, students. Task Force members conducted informal focus groups with their middle school and/or high school students to explore students’ perceptions of the teaching profession. They were asked if they are, or would, consider teaching as a career; why or why not; and what would make them consider teaching. Task Force findings were shared during the second Task Force meeting.

**November 2016:** Task Force Meeting 2 focused on teacher recruitment and retention. Members identified obstacles, shared promising practices, and brainstormed ideas that local education agencies, TEA, ESCs, and others should consider to address the challenges rural schools and

districts face regarding teacher recruitment and retention. The Task Force produced a preliminary list of the primary obstacles and possible ideas related to teacher recruitment and retention.

Task Force members recognized that the remaining topics were also important and made a collective decision to engage their superintendent colleagues from across the state to provide input on the obstacles, promising practices, and potential ideas for the remaining topics.

Between meetings 2 and 3, Task Force members conducted surveys and focus groups with their teachers concerning teacher retention. Teachers were asked several questions regarding the reasons why they have stayed in the district, why some of their colleagues have left, and what the district could do to ensure teachers stayed in the district. Task Force findings were shared during the third Task Force meeting.

### **January and February 2017 Rural Schools Regional Forums**

To ensure statewide superintendent engagement, TEA conducted seven (7) rural regional forums across the state. Forums were held in Abilene, Waco, Corpus Christi, Kilgore, Van Horn, Uvalde, and Lubbock. There were approximately 300 participants across all seven forums.

Topics discussed during the forum included: teacher recruitment, teacher retention, House Bill 5, leadership pipelines and support, use of technology, partnerships to leverage resources and facilities, and family and community engagement. Other topics that were discussed included the accountability system, districts of innovation, textbook purchases, educator certification, testing/data, grant applications, and funding.

**February 2017:** Task Force Meeting 3 focused on synthesizing all ideas compiled from the regional forums and previous Task Force meetings, prioritizing which ideas would be developed into recommendations, and crafting recommendations and rationales for the chosen ideas that would provide the most leverage in addressing obstacles that rural schools and districts encounter. To decide which ideas to prioritize, Task Force members focused on importance, feasibility, action-orientation, impact, and relevancy to identified obstacles. There were 14 recommendations drafted and selected at the end of this meeting.

TXCC and TEA drafted the preliminary report and Task Force members provided feedback on the draft report, ensuring accuracy of ideas and voice of the Task Force.

**March 2017:** Task Force Meeting 4 focused on incorporating feedback and finalizing the report. The meeting also shifted focus from identifying and finalizing recommendations to engaging with various departments in TEA to provide guidance and feedback on the current and new initiatives the agency is implementing or considering that addresses the obstacles stated by rural superintendents. The Task Force then engaged in a dialogue with the Commissioner regarding their experience and takeaways from serving on the Task Force.

## Appendix B: Rural School Task Force Promising Practices

### Introduction

As part of the process of developing recommendations for meeting the needs of rural districts, seven regional forums were held across the state in the winter of 2017, in addition to meetings of the Rural Schools Task Force. As part of the meetings and forums, promising practices for addressing the challenges identified by the Rural Schools Task Force and other challenges identified by participants at the forum were collected. Those ideas are presented in this appendix. TEA, in conjunction with TXCC, will also be releasing four Rural Spotlight Case Studies later this summer to highlight successful practices by Texas rural schools.

### Recruitment and Retention

#### Grow Your Own

“Grow Your Own” programs were suggested as one promising practice for teacher recruitment. Rather than recruiting from outside the district, this practice calls for developing teachers in the community. Two approaches were suggested. The first is recruiting high school students. The second is recruiting paraprofessionals to acquire teacher certifications.

To encourage high school students to become teachers, participants suggested:

- Developing and promoting education exploration classes in high school whereby high school students could serve as teaching aides, peer tutors, or assistants to coaches. This early exposure to interacting with others students can help prospective educators see the many benefits of the teaching profession.
- Sponsoring a chapter of [Texas Association of Future Educators](#) (TAFE).

All members of the Rural Schools Task Force were asked to hold a focus group with their high school seniors to inquire which of them were considering teaching as a career option. These superintendents were surprised at some of the responses from the students, particularly those who said no one had previously encouraged them to pursue teaching. Many Task Force members shared their desire to capitalize on this type of personal one-to-one recruitment of their current high school students to obtain their college degrees and return to their alma mater and teach. For paraprofessionals and aides who might choose to pursue certification, districts could allow release/travel time to attend classes, along with tuition reimbursement initiatives. A district that implements this practice suggested that the paraprofessionals must complete 9 hours each year with salary increases based on earning hours.

#### School/Community Benefits

A second category of promising practices for recruiting teachers focused on marketing and promoting the teaching profession, the schools, the districts, and the community. Too often the biggest advantages of working in a small school setting are under-promoted when recruiting

prospective teachers. These advantages include smaller class sizes, flexibility in scheduling, and fewer discipline issues. The smaller size of the school and district make building relationships with current staff and students easier. Some schools develop campus support groups and have social activities such as pot luck lunches or exercise groups. Rural communities are often close knit, and this can help support teachers who are new to the community. The level of community support is another benefit of living and working in a rural district.

Innovative approaches to scheduling are another option some rural districts are exploring to position themselves as an attractive place to work. One district in Texas has moved to a four-day school week while still fulfilling the minimum instructional minute requirements. Another district included compensation days within its year-long academic calendar to recognize and acknowledge training days required of teachers during the summer. These innovative scheduling initiatives could appeal to a broader pool of potential teachers.

Finally, it was suggested that districts strive to recruit couples to reduce the isolation teachers might experience. Working with the business community and those in the community focused on economic development in the community can help identify work for spouses who are not educators.

### **Housing**

For decades, several rural districts have provided housing options for its educators. These “teacherages” can help address a lack of housing within a rural or predominately agricultural or ranching community. Some districts lease houses in the community and then sublease them to teachers. Some also pay new teachers’ utility bills for a short time while they are living in school housing to help with moving expenses.

### **Financial Incentives**

Rural districts have tried a number of financial incentives to recruit and retain teachers. It was noted by participants at the forum and Task Force members that these incentives are not always easy to provide due to limited budgets. Districts have looked for grant opportunities or funds from foundations to support increased compensation or additional certifications.

Some districts use a variety of salary incentives to pay above the base salary. Signing bonuses are one strategy, while longevity bonuses for five, ten, and twenty years of service are another. Districts have also paid teachers varying amounts based on degrees and certifications. Some offer merit pay or provide an extra planning period. Other districts front load new teacher salaries so the scale tapers off for veteran teachers.

Increasing the number of certifications held by a teacher was a strategy used by some districts. The district then pays the teacher for obtaining these additional certifications as well as providing



stipends to teachers in subjects such as math, science, or CTE or for living in the district. One district pays teachers a stipend for multiple class or course preparations. Another district suggested asking all secondary teachers to obtain CTE certification.

### **Childcare Opportunities**

For teachers who have children, some districts provide daycare services or afterschool care. Districts may also provide flexibility in teachers' schedules to allow them to attend performances or competitions in which their own children are participating.

### **Transportation**

Because rural communities often do not have housing and teachers may have to reside in a different or larger community, some districts offer transportation (e.g., vans) to bring teachers into the community. Another strategy related to transportation is to allow teachers who are licensed as bus drivers to drive the buses from their place of residence to reduce both time and travel for those teachers.

### **Leadership for Creating a Supportive Climate**

Leadership was cited as a key element of retaining teachers. Specific leadership strategies included being visible for staff and students and supporting relationship building to instill an atmosphere of "being a family." This and other practices contribute to the development of a supportive climate.

Strategies for making teachers feel that they are valued beyond monetary benefits are crucial according to the forum participants and Task Force members. Some of these strategies include teacher participation in creating solutions to addressing challenges in the district, teacher input on the school calendar, and recognizing teachers' work publicly through newspaper articles or asking them to present to the school board.

Other practices suggested were bond initiatives for new facilities or maintaining the quality of current facilities, the superintendent and principal(s) serving in the role of advocate for teachers with parents and community members, and leadership academies for those interested in being a teacher leader, principal, or administrator.

### **House Bill 5**

Responding to House Bill 5 (HB 5) provides a challenge to rural districts. Providing courses to allow students to pursue the endorsements set out in HB 5 requires additional teachers who are certified to teach CTE courses. Strategies some districts are piloting include partnerships or cooperatives with other districts to share teachers or CTE director. One district created a cosmetology campus and sold enrollments for other districts' students as well as the space to other districts. Their advice was to start small with one business and build from there. Creative

scheduling, either early or late classes, may allow flexibility for teachers to be shared across districts. TxVSN offers some CTE courses that districts may access for their students.

Other approaches being tried by rural districts include offering stipends for maintenance personnel to obtain certification, using contract teachers, or employing probation officers to teach criminal justice courses. Many rural districts have used the District of Innovation program to waive some certification requirements for CTE courses. Streamlining offerings such that students have a pathway to at least one endorsement are another way rural districts are trying to address these challenges.

Partnerships with community colleges are another strategy some districts have implemented to offer endorsement options. Some districts, for example, have partnered with universities and community colleges to provide a culinary arts program. Dual credit programs that allow transfer of high school coursework for credit in trade areas at a community college may be another option. Some universities have also partnered with districts through Upward Bound or STEM academy programs.

Partnerships with businesses provide alternatives for both districts and students. Districts may recruit teachers for courses from local industries. Students may obtain industry certifications or internships for high-demand jobs such as machinists or welders.

### **Partnerships to Leverage Resources and Facilities**

Due to the limited resources in rural districts, various types of partnerships were reported to have provided support for teacher recruitment and retention, providing additional services for students, and using community resources for support.

#### **Partnerships with other districts**

Rural schools and districts can partner with one another to create shared service agreements or cooperatives. These cooperatives can help share personnel or bring teachers together to learn from teachers in other districts. In rural settings, teachers are often the only teacher for a content area in the district. In partnerships, bringing teachers together provides a network and support structure for them.

#### **Partnerships with Universities**

Partnerships with local colleges/universities can support rural districts in a number of ways, not only with teacher recruiting, as noted previously, but also with offering additional coursework for students. Universities and community colleges can offer dual credit courses, which increases the efficiency of staffing in the rural district. Summer college or university site programs for students broaden the students' experiences and help them understand the culture of higher education.

### **Partnerships with Technology**

Technology offers a number of ways to partner with others, both as a tool and as a vehicle to bring people together. One district reported their participation in a 1:1 device program in partnership with Apple. Dual credit programs may be offered online in partnership with other school districts, TxVSN, or higher education. Districts may partner with regional education service centers that offer summer technology camps for both teachers and students.

### **Partnerships with business and community**

Partnering with business and community is dual faceted. Districts may ask for support from community organizations or local businesses. Districts may also provide support for businesses in the community.

As noted above, businesses and industry offer the possibility of providing community internships or work programs as well as mentors for students. One district is working with community leaders to get students into community service projects. Another is working with the community to offer training for students to get them to stay in the community. Meeting with the local chamber of commerce education committee is one way to identify potential areas for collaboration.

Districts can also partner with their communities to provide support to community members and build positive relationships. High school classes might sponsor community businesses. Making school facilities available for community events or adult education is another potential way to support the community. Finally, providing incentives for local business and industry through tax breaks for partnering with education could support such partnerships.

### **Technology**

Participants at the regional forums and meeting of the Rural Schools Task Force suggested a number of ways rural districts might overcome obstacles to the use of technology to support teachers, students, and the community. The eRate program was also noted as helping rural districts' ability to provide technology resources in their schools.

### **Support for Teachers**

To support teachers, the principal can take the lead in the instructional of use of technology. Providing professional development to help teachers gain skills in the use of technology for instruction is one strategy. One district hosts its own technology conference. They bring in speakers, have breakout sessions, and offer the opportunity to participate to surrounding districts. Some districts participate in technology cooperatives through their regional education service centers. The Texas Computer Educators Association hosts an annual conference as well. Connecting teachers via social networks for opportunities to collaborate outside the district and encouraging peer-to-peer teaching are additional strategies for building teachers skills for integrating technology in the classroom.

The superintendent can host virtual staff meetings or offer grant opportunities for teachers to allow them to ask for particular technologies and explain how these will be used in the classroom. Providing technical support or technology coaches to support use of technology is another means the district can employ. Some districts ask students to serve as technology coaches for teachers.

### **Support for Students**

Technology was suggested as a tool for improving learning opportunities for students. Blended learning, where teachers facilitate courses that include online and face-to-face components, were cited as a way to offer additional courses for students. Flipped classrooms, a form of blended learning, allows students to use technology to access the presentation of content from home so that class time at school may be used for practice or project-based learning using that content. Blended classes and fully online courses may be strategies for credit recovery, to reduce scheduling issues, and to offer AP and advanced courses. Finally, districts can support students by providing wireless access to the Internet on school buses so that students can work on assignments while riding the bus the long distances they often have to travel in rural areas.

### **Support for the Community**

Two suggested strategies rural districts can use to support the use of technology outside the school buildings include offering community-wide wireless access and capturing district events (programs, games, assemblies) and posting or streaming those for parents and community members to view.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

Although rural communities are typically close-knit, family and community engagement in the activities of the school may not be as strong as the rural district would hope. Suggested practices for improving family and community engagement included providing meals and childcare at parent meetings. An interpreter should be provided for all meetings with parents whose spoken language is other than English. Scheduling parent conferences at convenient times for parents was another strategy suggested.

Communicating in multiple ways and in the right form was recommended. The goal of communication is to improve the accuracy of information about the district across the community. Promoting the positive aspects and celebrating successes help encourage parents and the community to engage with education. Academic showcases are one strategy for celebrating success. Offering special events such as senior citizen lunches, veteran day celebrations, or grandparents' lunch may provide an opportunity to share positive news about the district that can be broadly shared in the community.

*“Meet Them Where They Are”* was suggested as a way to increase family and community engagement. Districts can schedule parent events in conjunction with ballgames, student programs, and pep-rallies or schedule elementary student activities during halftime of high school football games. Educators can attend community gatherings and civic meetings to keep parents and the community informed. Finally, technology tools were another vehicle recommended for communicating with parents and the community. Some forum participants recommended a weekly phone call to parents or the use of Facebook and other social media to communicate broadly with a range of audiences.

Beyond sharing information, listening to parents was cited as a critical element of strong two-way communication. Participants at the regional forums suggested conducting parent and community surveys or hosting focus groups to collect parents’ ideas and perceptions. These methods can also help identify factors that keep people disengaged. One district held a “Did You Know” Town Hall event for members of the community to familiarize the public with the exciting initiatives the district was offering. The response was overwhelmingly positive and many of those in attendance shared that they had no idea of all the offerings the school district had in place to serve its students.