

# RURAL SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS:

## Four Case Studies



Andrea D. Beesley &  
Zoe A. Barley Ph.D.

**MREL**

**For more information, contact McREL at**  
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning  
4601 DTC Boulevard, Suite 500  
Denver, CO 80237  
Phone : 303.337.0990 Fax : 303.337.3005 E-mail : [info@mcrel.org](mailto:info@mcrel.org)  
Web site: [www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org)

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# Rural Schools That Beat the Odds: Four Case Studies

## *~Introduction~*

School consolidation and closures, as well as inequities in funding for rural communities, have created hardships for rural families and schools. Rural educators, as all educators, are experiencing pressure from the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to achieve 100 percent student proficiency in core subject areas by the year 2014. This NCLB requirement has focused attention on populations of students, minority groups, English Language Learners, and special students, who have too often been overlooked. The current press for all students to achieve has prompted an effort to develop a better knowledge base of the school factors that equate with student success above and beyond the portfolio of evidence-based school and instructional practices for the high-needs student populations. Students in rural communities, while often perceived as doing well enough, also are challenged to achieve full proficiency, and their schools face serious issues in providing the full range of qualified teachers and supportive resources to insure success.

The research team at McREL, responding to the challenge of high-needs schools that must achieve high performance, conducted a large national study to identify differences between high-performing high-needs schools (beat-the-odds schools) and low-performing high-needs schools. The four success stories that follow capture data from the study and impressions from site visits. There is a strong unique element in each of the schools visited. The schools are in three of the Central Region states, and the states vary greatly in the resources provided to each school. Community context, although rural, also varies, and this variation contributes to the uniqueness of each school. The primary contribution of this work is that within these four case studies are success stories from which other schools can glean ideas for their own success.



### *Small town living lacks frills*

It takes three hours to drive from Kansas City to Novinger, Missouri. The trip involves leaving I-35 to travel over rolling hills on several small state highways that are strung together and often run parallel to the gravel paths and railroad tracks they have replaced. If the sun goes down before reaching your destination, you might spot a small red fox in your headlights. In daylight, your arrival in Novinger is marked by a country store advertising groceries and a deli, a small beauty shop in a wood-frame house, and Adair County School. The school sits on the only paved road in town.

Novinger is made up of one-lane gravel roads that look like driveways, giving the town the appearance of a large lawn dotted with small houses. If the townspeople see you coming, they will pull over or wait until you pass by before turning into the road. Most of the town's residents live in mobile homes, many of which need a window or roof repaired, but there are also small white or yellow cottages with vine-like weeds crawling toward their roofs and making them seem abandoned. Next to many houses are large aluminum garages with several bays that house prized recreational vehicles. The principal of Adair knows each of these homes and the children from them that attend the school. She knows, too, that there are several adults and six children living in a small cabin and a camper, and that at one point the children were also sleeping in a tent. She knows that for these children, a double-wide trailer is an out-of-reach dream.

The school runs one of its six buses out of town to pick up students from the large, prosperous farms and cattle ranches that lie nearby and have been in the same families for over a hundred years. One farm is owned by a family that made money in the old coal mine that has long since

closed; a ranch is owned by the president of the school board. Each ranch boasts several houses and barns that have served successive generations. The houses are mostly modest wooden structures, but one is a new red brick ranch-style house, situated across from the old farmhouse. The family had the money to build the house for some time but hesitated because of the culture of the community, which does not value open displays of such prosperity.

### ***Thirteen teachers carry the load***

Adair Elementary School serves 151 students across eight grades, preschool through sixth grade (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2005). It has been a Title I school with a schoolwide program since 1997 (Adair Co. R-I Web site, 2005). The school employs one teacher for each grade, and a pre-school aide, along with one teacher each for communication arts, music, physical education, and the Title I Reading program. There is one visual arts teacher for both the elementary and secondary school (Adair Co. R-I Web site, 2005). According to NCES data, the school officially employs 13.0 teachers and has a student/teacher ratio of 11.6. The school is almost exclusively white (99 percent), and almost half of its students (48 percent) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2005).

### ***Poverty, few role models, and lack of program funding are barriers***

School personnel and community members reported that many people in the town surrounding Adair Elementary are impoverished. The town itself has few businesses and, therefore, a small property tax base, which restricts the funding available to the school. The community as a whole has a relatively low level of education, so students have limited access to successful role models and may have to work to overcome their parents' problems. Teachers and administrators also report a relatively high number of students requiring special education services, which causes pressure on funding and staffing, especially when these students move in and out of the district.

# Beating the Odds

## *Using student data*

Adair Elementary uses several kinds of test data. The principal and all teachers we spoke with discussed state-level assessments, reading assessments, and other assessments provided by publishers, and emphasized the focus on testing at the school. According to teachers, they use testing to identify students who need extra help, such as tutoring. Testing results also are compared with grade-level expectations to identify gaps, which teachers address by changing lesson plans or curricula and trying new teaching strategies. The effort to close gaps also influences textbook selection, as staff members choose new books on the basis of how well they address achievement needs. According to the principal, in order for testing to provide useful guidance for teaching, it is important that teachers trust it, believe that it really matters, and realize that it presents information about student performance that is congruent with results of their own classroom assessments. Testing also creates pressure to use time well, according to some teachers, because they want to make sure that students are ready for assessments.

## *Involving parents*

Even though many people in the town of Novinger are struggling, parents do get involved with the school, and the school makes an effort to reach out to them. Teachers reported that Family Nights, where parents participate in activities at the school, involve parents with their children's learning and teach parents how to support them academically, especially in reading. Teachers stated that they must be willing to respond to parents and to keep them informed so that they will feel comfortable getting involved and coming to the school to help with activities. Consistently implementing school-wide procedures, such as sending a green folder with parent information home every Friday in every grade, helps facilitate parental involvement because parents know what to expect from year to

year. The principal recommended making personal invitations to parents, especially those who are “the last person in the world anybody would expect you to call,” for activities that would not be threatening to their concerns about their own level of education, such as asking them to help cook hamburgers for track and field day or put up playground equipment. When these parents report positive experiences, others may feel more comfortable about joining in. Also, because the school is the largest employer in the town and may be seen as authoritarian, the principal engages in activities that make her role seem less intimidating to others, such as eating in the local restaurant in the summer and serving food at school suppers.

### ***Keeping expectations high***

School personnel described their goals for students as both academic and behavioral. Teachers reported that they expect students to score according to grade-level expectations. Teachers and administrators said that the school’s expectations for students are higher than in the past, as are the state’s expectations. However, they commented that the state’s standards for grade-level achievement have risen to the point where they may no longer be developmentally appropriate for young children. Nevertheless, high goals show students that they are valued, and students tend to “rise to the occasion” when informed about high goals, according to the principal. Teachers and community members also described high expectations for school behavior, such as respect, independence, and responsibility. Students are informed of both types of goals, which also are reinforced by the principal.

### ***Nurturing teachers’ growth***

Adair personnel participate in ongoing professional development with specific goals, teachers and the principal said. Teachers are dismissed early every other Wednesday in order to allow them to participate in professional development, although the teachers would like to have more time.

Half the Wednesdays are for elementary teachers and the other half are for K–12, uniting the entire school building. Teachers who desire other opportunities, such as attending conferences, can receive funding through a professional development committee made up of other teachers. The teachers and principal reported that Adair’s professional development is focused on reading and instructional methods, and giving information on testing performance. Teachers stated that their professional development time helps them with curriculum alignment and cross-grade mapping, and also lets them keep up with trends in education. They described their development experiences as relevant and interesting. According to the principal, the key to effective professional development is having specific goals for it, observing and supporting teachers as they put it into action, and holding them accountable for it. “If you do not have an instructional leader or a curriculum director or a teacher leader who holds you accountable for what you’ve learned, and gives it purpose, you’ve wasted your professional development,” she said.

According to teachers and parents, relatively long teacher retention at Adair provides continuity and helps teachers really get to know the students. There has been turnover in some positions, probably related to salaries, according to the superintendent. Most teachers who stay have other ties to the community, such as family in the area. Many of them said that they also wanted their own children to attend the school. However, some teachers described coming from much bigger cities, and staying because they liked the school and appreciated the way that the local community supports teachers. According to the principal, teachers must put forth a lot of effort in their jobs because of limited resources and the poverty of the community, so those that stay are those willing to work hard.

## Prevalent Themes

### *Community support and involvement*

In Novinger, the school and the community have a mutually supportive relationship. According to teachers and community leaders, the presence of the school itself plays a large part in holding the community together, along with supporting the few local businesses; the teachers and students, for example, go to the store and deli after school. The school also reaches out to the community by offering the use of the building for events like the yearly craft fair, and invites residents, not just parents, to participate in programs such as the character education event held at the community center. One teacher commented that residents believe the school is one of the best things the town has to offer.

Despite the difficult lives of many people in the community, local residents support the school as well, and according to teachers, many realize that education is an important part of life. The community provides a lot of volunteers, especially elderly people who help in fall and spring, former teachers, and grandmothers. In fact, many people in the community are better able to provide volunteer time than donate money. A recent failed tax levy concerned many school personnel and residents, but, nevertheless, a community member said that the town has always wanted the school to look nice and have good facilities, because they take pride in it. In addition to individual residents, community institutions and businesses provide support. The principal described how the Novinger Fire Association provides money and conducts fire safety education, the Extension office helps with economics activities and camping trips, a local health organization does drug prevention programs, and students from a nearby college help with tutoring. Businesses from the larger town to the east also provide extra funding. According to the principal, the key to getting support from the community is not being afraid to ask, to extend a personal invitation to help, and to let needs be known.

## *Culture of caring*

Although the principal and teachers at Adair often use test data to evaluate and improve the children's learning, they believe that demonstrating caring and affection for students is also very important, especially in light of many students' difficult home lives. According to the principal, although she is often impressed by the resiliency of the children, strong relationships with school personnel are important for kids who do not have them at home: "If that positive association to something has to come from the school, then it's a duty—it's your calling to make sure it happens as an educator." Because they care so much for the students, teachers must have compassion and flexibility, and work especially hard: "They do it. I don't even know they do it. They just do it, because it needs to be done for their kids."

The small size of the school and community, as well as the attention given to the whole child, enable school personnel to gather knowledge about students' situations—who has special needs, or who is living in a troubled home. This allows them to provide individualized responses to academic and personal problems. For example, the principal takes students at risk out on special outings, to show them they are worth more than they may think. It is part of the school culture for children and teachers to share hugs and greetings in the hallways, even when the students are now in another class, and former students now in high school often return to visit their elementary teachers. Other school employees, such as cooks, janitors, and the superintendent, participate in the culture of caring. Because the students feel included, accepted, and at home at Adair, they are willing to go to teachers when they have a problem, school personnel stated. In turn, one teacher said, students tend to behave well because they know teachers genuinely care about them: "It's not just that you're a body in my classroom, but I care about you. And if you need me, not just academically, if you need to talk to me, I'm here to listen." Parents echoed this statement, saying that teachers truly care about the children and their progress and do not let anyone "fall through the cracks." A character

education program was started to help teach students to be kind and respectful to one another, involving specific strategies and words to use in school situations, because students may not get this kind of instruction at home. Finally, teachers reported that they treat one another with respect, as a family, and help each other in ways that go beyond the academic.

### *Leadership*

The principal takes a direct role in the leadership of the school, according to teachers and the principal herself. Because the students are so needy, the principal must expect a lot out of teachers, and “not apologize for it,” even though the teachers get less district assistance than they would in larger districts. Not all teachers are prepared for the intensity of the involvement required. The principal stated that it is important to establish consistent school-wide routines, such as a 90-minute language arts period and the folder system to communicate with parents. However, she has realized that developing professional community among the faculty depends on sharing power and accepting others’ ways of doing things: “And to get through that I had to get over some of my own leadership power things. I had to give it up, and realize that things were going to go better quicker with a team effort.”

Most teachers mentioned the presence of the principal in their classrooms to observe the implementations of programs: “She’s there to check up on us, so we have to be on our toes, is how I feel.” Many commented that this, along with her practice of asking teachers to set specific professional goals, leads to them keeping their students on task. Some teachers added that the principal may seem controlling but that this can help with school-wide planning and goal-setting, and brings people together for the good of the school. Because the principal is so involved, teachers stated that they are willing to try new curriculum innovations because they know they will receive support for their implementation. The teachers also appreciate the principal’s willingness to keep up with and communicate state and federal mandates and write grants. Some of the teachers mentioned

that years earlier, the elementary school did not have its own principal, which caused things to “fall apart” because the elementary was essentially ignored. Although the principal and new superintendent are both strong leaders, teachers said they both are willing to listen to problems, let teachers know they are being heard, and explain decisions that are made, so that they are products of shared reasoning rather than remote mandates.

## Conclusions

Adair Elementary has a lot working against it because of its limited funding and the poverty of its community. The school is successful in part because it has frankly accepted the challenge of its environment and responded with intensity and hard work. School personnel did not assume that the community, stressed as it is, would not want to or be able to help out; instead they reached out with a variety of opportunities for involvement to which parents and residents have responded. The principal and teachers are highly focused on assessment data, and take a scientific approach to student achievement as measured through testing, but their orientation toward students is one of genuine caring and affection. The results are that students feel welcome and cared for, and are willing to be respectful and put forth effort in the classroom. This type of atmosphere, along with the help and leadership of the principal, inspires teachers to stay at the school because it provides a supportive environment for teaching.

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*Miles of fields and hills isolate a small western town*

Driving on I-76 across the plains east of Denver, you became accustomed to the sight of soybean fields and grain elevators and the smell of refineries and feedlots. As the Front Range recedes, the land begins to look more like the Great Plains—rolling hills covered with short grass and dotted with cattle. The Julesburg exit sign is located about five miles from the Nebraska border. An inn, a Subway sandwich shop, and a large white grain elevator mark the overpass which takes visitors above the railroad tracks and into town.

The town itself is a few miles west of the main highway across northeastern Colorado. A small downtown with one- and two-story brick buildings stretches out along the rails. At the downtown intersections, there are no traffic lights or stop signs, so visitors drive cautiously, stopping at every corner. In reality, though, there are few cars on the road for them to worry about. Paw prints painted on the road lead to the school past a building that is a combined grocery/deli/hardware/feed store. The junior and senior high schools are in one low-slung brick building, separated by the superintendent's office. Students walk the short distance to the elementary school cafeteria to eat lunch.

*Part-time teachers help meet the need*

Julesburg Junior-Senior High School is located in Julesburg, Colorado, five miles southwest of the Nebraska border, and has 124 students in grades 7 through 12. Approximately 15 percent of the students are English Language Learners, and 36 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Hispanic students comprise 20 percent of the student enrollment,

two

with white students making up the other 80 percent (greatschools.net, 2005). Eight full-time and three part-time teachers teach at the school, along with three paraprofessionals (Colo. Dept. of Ed., 2005). The student/teacher ratio is 13 to 1 (greatschools.net).

### ***Few jobs, declining school enrollment, and retiring teachers darken the future outlook***

The town has a relatively high poverty rate and a small tax base. Because the area has few employers, people who grow up in Julesburg often move away to find jobs, said the principal and teachers. As a result, the student enrollment at Julesburg has been steadily declining over the past several years and, with it, the funding available to the school and the number of teachers. At this point, the staff is at a bare minimum and programs such as art and music are threatened. Nevertheless, teachers will start retiring over the next several years, and the school staff is concerned about how to attract new teachers to a community whose historically high teacher retention was linked to former agricultural or generational ties.

## **Beating the Odds**

### ***Using student data***

Both principals and teachers said that an intense focus on student data is in part responsible for student success at Julesburg. In addition to examining state assessment data, in 2002, Julesburg began using computerized adaptive assessments developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) to help monitor student learning in the areas of language arts, mathematics, and science. According to the principal, NWEA assessments are aligned with state standards and provide opportunities for continual classroom assessment, which helps teachers know exactly where students are in their achievement. Teachers said that the NWEA tests identify precisely in which topic areas students need improvement. The

assessments are also used to identify students who require remedial help, or SILO (Supplemental Instructional Learning Opportunities). Intended to ensure students are held accountable for their learning, SILO establishes proficiency standards on state and school assessments that students must attain. The principal said that if these standards are not met, students participate in a mandatory assistance program during the regular school year, even if they have to forego desired elective classes to do so. After receiving this additional assistance, students must show attainment of proficiency to avoid being retained in their current grade level.

Teachers said that the assessments have also encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning. Students monitor and evaluate their own progress through individual growth charts that compare their performance to other students in their school as well as all the students who took the assessment.

### ***Bolstering learning with policies and organizational structures***

To better support students' academic success, Julesburg has adopted new policies and organizational structures. The principal reported that more stringent graduation requirements were adopted in 2002 to raise the curriculum requirements and grade-level learning expectations of all students. Both the principal and teachers said that the implementation of a tougher attendance policy has led to improved student attendance and, therefore, greater student learning. To help create an environment in which students can perform at their best, the principal said that the state assessments have been integrated into "a regular part of what kids do," meaning that assessments are now given over a three-week period and are administered by the appropriate subject area teacher in his or her regular classroom. The principal of the junior-senior high school and the principal of the elementary school also share the role of district superintendent. This means that teachers have a direct line of communication to the school board, which has expedited the fulfillment of teacher and student needs.

### ***Maintaining high expectations***

Teachers, the principal, and community members all said that the community has always had high expectations of the junior-senior high. One teacher and parent said, “There hasn’t really been a kid that’s wanted to do something and wasn’t equipped when he or she left here.” At the same time, teachers and the principals have high expectations for all students. The time and effort put into using the NWEA assessments shows the school’s commitment to individual student achievement, as does the attitude that several teachers displayed when they said that even lower-ability students can grow and improve so that they perform well in classes and on assessments. The principal commented that the way that administrators and teachers do their jobs—caring about what happens at the school, being prepared and purposeful, and expecting a lot of themselves—communicates that they expect no less from the students.

### ***Retaining dedicated teachers***

The longevity of the teaching staff was repeatedly identified by teachers as a strength and contributor to high student achievement, because it makes it easy for them to work together for the success of the students. An administrator said that the retention of teachers leads to a feeling of continuity and community across grades K–12. When asked why teacher retention is so high, the principal responded that there is a culture within the school “that allows teachers to feel important, valued, and a part of something special” that provides rewards beyond monetary compensation. One teacher described it this way: “I just feel here that we’re all on the same page striving for exactly the same thing, and I think it makes a difference.” One teacher commented that her reason for staying was the strength of the community and the idea of allowing her children to enjoy the benefits of a small town. Another teacher noted that the majority of teachers have agricultural roots in their family background, which helps in a small rural town.

## Prevalent Themes

### *Administrative leadership*

Many of the changes credited with increased student achievement at Julesburg, such as the attendance policy, SILO program, honors diploma, and emphasis on data-driven instruction, were put in place by the two principals/co-superintendents. Although some teachers reported feeling an initial hesitancy about new measures, such as the stringent attendance policy, they agreed that in the end the policies have improved the teaching and learning environment. Both administrators have supported teachers in the new initiatives through professional development opportunities, particularly in data-driven and differentiated instruction, so that teachers will have the knowledge and skills they need to live up to the high expectations of the school community. While the high school principal mentioned that if he notices a teacher having problems in the classroom, he will have a dialogue with the teacher about the issue, both principals also said that they will find a way to provide teachers with any legitimate professional development opportunity they request in order to improve their teaching. Teachers tended to agree; one said, “If [I] go to the administration and say I want this, I need this to teach, and here’s why, they purchase it or help us out.” The principals mentioned that they appreciate the leadership of the teachers in mentoring others and implementing the programs they have initiated.

### *Community*

Due to the small size of the town, many teachers and administrators play multiple roles within the community through a variety of civic organizations such as the museum committee and Rotary. Some also double as community educators in the GED program. Principals and teachers said that this connects school personnel with the community, which aids teacher retention, and helps create a feeling of trust and support between the community and the school. As with other rural towns, community

groups frequently use the school building for events, one teacher said. “Just probably like every other small school, I mean, in a community the school is the community. It’s where everybody kind of hangs out.” A community member went farther, saying of the school, “This place is the heartbeat of this community. If these doors shut and didn’t open again... this town would just sort of wither away.” Local facilities such as the nursing home and assisted living center request student groups to provide entertainment or activities.

At the same time, the school relies heavily on the community for financial and athletic support and parental involvement. Teachers described how community members attend games and buy products from fundraisers, even when their own children no longer attend school. An established internship program enables upperclassmen to explore various career options—the community provides positions for the interns and businesspeople act as positive role models in students’ potential career choices. One teacher also mentioned that the community supports the school’s goals and provides good parenting for their children, and “without that, schools wouldn’t be successful.”

## Conclusions

At Julesburg, student data dominates teaching and learning. It profoundly affects what teachers do in the classroom and what courses students are allowed to take, and is the constant focus of administrators’ attention. However, individual student needs are truly at the heart of the emphasis on test data. Rather than allow class- or school-level data on state tests to be the measure by which students and teachers are judged, school personnel instead employ a system that gives detailed and ongoing assessment information about students’ performance. They then use differentiated instruction to meet each student’s particular needs. The result is a personalized education intended to maximize the achievement of each student. These efforts are supported by school policies intended to keep

the students focused on learning and, while they are implemented by administrators, the policies garner teachers' support as well. Because the teachers feel included and important in the school, they tend to stay. Even though the small community cannot offer a lot of amenities, their support of the school reinforces high expectations for students.

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*A stunning landscape cradles a small town*

To reach Sundance, Wyoming, you drive west on I-90 through the Black Hills and past billboards advertising the Motorcycle Museum and Hall of Fame and those sponsored by Harley-Davidson dealerships to promote the motorcycle mecca of Sturgis, South Dakota. Large deer herds also line both sides of the highway. Along the way, sunny skies can unexpectedly turn to fog, and when they do, the fog grows increasingly dense and limits visibility to no more than a dozen feet in front of a car. As quickly as it occurs, however, the fog disappears. Similarly, an overnight rain can turn into a snow that blankets the pines and the Black Hills in a scene reminiscent of a Christmas card. It is a stunning, if ever-changing, environment.

Sundance is a small town stretched out along the highway, sandwiched between the Belle Fourche River and the shadow of the mountain that gave the town its name. Short roads lined with modest ranch houses end abruptly at the slope of the mountainside. The downtown features a museum, gift shops catering to tourists, restaurants with “Bikers Welcome” signs, a boarded-up former school building, a county courthouse, and a monument commemorating the Sundance Kid, who spent time in the county jail for stealing horses. On the east side of town, there is a hospital and a Forest Service installation; highways lead north to a state park and Devil’s Tower National Monument. The high school is there as well; probably the largest building in the town, it is a two-story red brick structure with smoked glass and a curved wall.

three

### ***7th graders are high schoolers***

Students in grades 7 through 12 attend Sundance High School. The school enrolls 196 students, employs the equivalent of 16.5 full-time teachers, and has a student/teacher ratio of 11.9. The students are predominantly white (97 percent), and 16.8 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2005).

### ***School leaders strive to fund meaningful extras***

Sundance High School faces fewer financial obstacles than other schools. It has relatively high per-student funding because of money from state mineral rights and state funds for school buildings. The surrounding community also has job opportunities that draw professional employees, and, thus, the student body has a low free and reduced-price lunch rate. According to the principal, Sundance does have a funding shortfall in activity money, such as for sports and other extracurriculars, which is difficult because these activities are so important to the school. Teachers noted that their rotating schedule, while allowing students to take more classes, makes teacher collaboration difficult because teachers in the same subject area do not share planning time. There is also little time after school, because teachers are coaching or sponsoring activities.

## **Beating the Odds**

### ***Getting to know parents***

Both teachers and parents reported that teachers get to know the parents, which helps the parents feel comfortable in the school. Teachers tend to help one another recognize the parents of their students when they come for school events. The principal said that although there is not currently a parent organization at the school, the parents are willing to help, contribute money, and volunteer where needed. They attend activities and sports

events even when teams are losing or when their own kids are grown. In the past, they have helped to get the funding and legislation necessary to build the new school. Many school alumni have stayed in the community, so they support the school when their own children become students.

### ***Holding high expectations for everyone***

Teachers and the principal agreed that local parents tend to have high expectations for their children and appreciate education. Teachers said that although they have different teaching styles, they all expect a lot from students, and ask that students do their best to excel. The teachers want students to understand that high goals are for everyone, whether they are college-bound or not, and students respond by competing with each other to meet them. High student expectations are reinforced by parents, and students get that message as soon as they enter the junior-high level. As an expression of the goals for students, the school has added more advanced and college-credit courses in areas such as English and mathematics. Teachers also mentioned that it is important to inform students about specific goals and acknowledge their efforts. One former elementary principal opined that at Sundance, there are few excuses for low test scores, saying “You know, in a school this size, and in a community with this kind of parent support—we don’t have high levels of poverty. We don’t have high levels of crime. We don’t have large classes. There aren’t too many excuses why our kids shouldn’t really be scoring [in] probably about the 80th or better percentile of the kids.”

### ***Broadly supporting teachers***

Both teachers and the principal said that teacher retention is a key factor in the success of the school because it leads to consistency and stability, which helps with school improvement. Teachers tend to stay to raise families in the community because they like the students, they grew up there, and they like the location, with its impressive scenery and opportunities for outdoor activities. The principal also said that teachers have

input into hiring, and they hire those with whom they can work easily. He also noted that nearby colleges are sources of new teachers and master's degrees for current teachers. That the school is near another state which pays lower teacher salaries prevents many from leaving strictly because of money. Parents said that they support the teachers and want them to stay at the school, so they reinforce teachers' high expectations at home. Teachers and the principal said that teachers support one another when they go through difficult times, so that they become a stronger faculty family.

## Prevalent Themes

### *Community support and student-community involvement*

Regarding the relationship between the school and the community, one teacher commented that they are not separate at all, but related and connected. Parents, community leaders, and teachers all said that the school is the community. Its performances, events, and games are the fundamental social focal point of the town, and people "fill the halls with participation." One parent said, "It really fills a need for the community because really, what else is there? We don't have a lot of distractions." Both students and teachers are involved in outreach to the community. Teachers described helping townspeople with questions in their areas of expertise. Through social studies classes, students do community service, such as raking leaves, painting signs, playing music at the nursing home, and helping at the library. They also go to the elementary school to conduct after-school study skills tutoring, put on pep assemblies, and coach elementary sports. Finally, the school building also is used by community groups for events, such as the health fair, community education, and summer Forest Service programs.

According to the principal, Sundance is fortunate to be in a beautiful location and to have several local institutions that help out the school and

bring in a mix of professionals and nonprofessionals to add diversity to the community. Sundance is the county seat and home to an energy company, the Forest Service, a courthouse, schools, and a hospital. The school has established partnerships with the energy company, the Forest Service, and Wyoming Game and Fish, in which students work on projects that enrich the curriculum. Sundance has a work-study program in which community organizations, such as auto shops, restaurants, the title company, and the courthouse, employ interested seniors for part of the school day. Individuals also support the school. Several teachers mentioned that local business employees help with funding extracurriculars, such as sports. During fundraisers, residents buy what the students are selling, whether they need it or not, according to teachers. Community members are always willing to speak at events and to volunteer. The former elementary principal also noted that the area supports the students with other activities, such as scouting, 4-H, rodeo, and church activity groups. When the old school building was condemned, the community fought for a new building, which required both bond issues and legislation. Teachers and community members said that there is a feeling of trust between the town and the school because of the school's long history of success, people's own past experiences at the school, and the success of graduates, so they are willing to help the school when needed.

### *Extracurricular activities*

School personnel, parents, and community leaders all said that, in addition to sports, Sundance High is also known for its award-winning music program. Teachers suggested that extracurriculars are important because they give students a reason to be at school other than academics, give them success experiences, and encourage them to participate in the school community. Although such a small school cannot offer many extracurriculars, all respondents said that extracurriculars have a high rate of participation, with estimates ranging from over 80 percent to "almost all students." A community member noted that music in particular involves many students, "from the non-popular to the most popular. They're all

in there participating and seem to be equal in that program.” A teacher also said that extracurriculars tend to be inclusive: “I think the kids are receptive to all the kids being involved, and not so much angling out kids and prejudice.” Another teacher said that students who are struggling with academic or behavior problems, although there are not many at the school, tend to do better if they can convince them to become involved in school activities. The need to be eligible for sports and activities encourages students to keep their grades up, teachers noted, but beyond that, students who are experiencing a winning sports season will often do better in the classroom. Students often get close to teachers through after-school activities as well, said one teacher.

### *A “great kids” mindset*

When we asked about the success of the school, parents, community leaders, and especially teachers credited the students saying, “We have a great bunch of kids.” One teacher mentioned that because so many of the students are children of former students, they come to the school ready to work hard and, because teachers know the students’ parents, “We don’t have kids who act out very much for that reason.” A teacher who also is a coach noted that Sundance’s student-athletes are better behaved and more polite than others when they travel to games, which reflects well on the school. He said that he did not have to warn them about this, necessarily—there just were not many problems. Kids encourage each other to be involved in school, reported teachers. They also said that the senior class competed with one another in academics and were proud of scoring well on tests, and that this often sets an example that can improve the attitudes of the younger students toward their classwork. Although they are competitive, students are willing to help one another academically, teachers commented. In general, students put forth effort and believe in the school, even to the point that they drop by after they have graduated to give teachers feedback on their teaching and keep them informed about what they are doing.

## Conclusions

Sundance High is fortunate not to face the financial and socioeconomic challenges of some rural schools. However, other schools in the similar settings do not perform as well as Sundance, so why is it so successful? Through the efforts of the school personnel and the community, it has a strong culture of high expectations and support for education that has perpetuated itself through several generations. The keys and themes to success discussed here are all manifestations of this culture. Parents remember working hard when they went to Sundance, so they expect their children to work hard as well, and they reinforce the high expectations of teachers and the principal. Extracurriculars allow the students to get more deeply involved with the school while they provide entertainment and pride for the community, which, in turn, supports the school with money, time, and effort. Although the students who attend Sundance are probably not inherently better than students anywhere else, the consistent opinion of the school and community that they are “great kids” inspires them to live up to that, because they can see how well the school and student body are perceived in the town.

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### *A small farmhouse marks the way*

Merino is less than two hours from Denver, but it is a world away. At the Merino exit from the interstate, in the middle of rolling fields watered by center-pivot irrigation, there is only a small farmhouse. Although we knew the town was small, we had expected more than this. We drove northwest along a county road and a state highway until we saw Merino's water tower. Railroad tracks that parallel the highway reveal Merino's history as a stop on the Union Pacific. It is not difficult to find Merino Junior-Senior High School, because there are few roads in the town. However, we were surprised to find that the school is on a gravel road, close to the elementary school. As we drove up, we took care to avoid hitting any of the students, some of whom were dawdling along the road as they returned from the elementary school, where they eat lunch in the cafeteria. Students' cars were parked haphazardly around the gravel parking lot, which is bordered by some modest ranch-style manufactured homes. The school building, clad in brick and aluminum siding, had the appearance of being added to gradually over the years.

### *Student and teacher populations are stable*

Merino Junior-Senior High School serves 148 students in grades 7 through 12 (greatschools.net, 2005). Approximately 37% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and none are English Language Learners. The student population is 93% white and 5% Hispanic (greatschools.net, 2005). The school employs eleven full-time teachers, five part-time teachers, and one paraprofessional (Colo. Dept. of Ed., 2005). The student/teacher ratio is 12 to 1 (greatschools.net).

## ***Barriers***

The principal reported that the school gets relatively good funding because, as a small attendance center, it receives state money that supplements local property taxes. In addition, one-third of the students are from out of the district and attend by choice, which also helps its finances. Nevertheless, parents mentioned that, although the school makes wise use of its money (one said, “We get \$1000 worth of quality for every dollar”), they would like additional funding to be available. The principal also mentioned that the out-of-district students, while helping fund the school, can sometimes disrupt the chemistry of classes until they become accustomed to their new environment. Community members and the principal said that the area is economically depressed and offers few job opportunities, which discourages young families and graduates from staying in the area. Finally, teachers and the principal mentioned that the relative isolation of their rural setting means that Merino students do not have some of the same opportunities and experiences as their more metropolitan peers.

## **Beating the Odds**

### ***Structural supports for learning***

School personnel said that there are many organizational structures in place that support a focus on learning. Classes are kept relatively small by, for example, splitting a class of 37, in order to support high instructional standards and allow for more individualized teaching. Teachers said that there are also late-start mornings that are used for teacher collaboration and for sharing ideas among themselves and with the administration. Teachers and the principal all said that a move to block scheduling has helped student learning. Students take four 80-minute classes at a time, finishing an entire one-unit course in a single semester. Rather than teach six shorter courses in a day, teachers prepare three courses and have one

block for planning. Over the span of a school year, each course gets the same instructional time, but students and teachers alike focus on fewer courses at once with a relatively greater intensity. Teachers reported that block scheduling gives them more time to focus on the content, which leads to deeper understanding, and allows them to do more projects and discovery learning. The block schedule has also allowed students to choose from a greater variety of classes, according to the principal. At the same time the block schedule was enacted, the graduation requirements were raised to four units of math, English, social studies, and science. To encourage more students to take higher math, the district also started algebra for all 8th graders. In addition, teachers said that Merino has a more difficult grading scale than surrounding schools; students must have a 70 or above to pass. Although some students and parents think the scale should be more permissive, teachers said that it encourages the students to strive harder.

### ***High expectations for students***

Teachers and parents said that student expectations are higher at Merino than at other area schools, and that this drives the school's success. In fact, students who come into Merino from other schools sometimes struggle initially because they are not used to the high expectations and the workload. Students know what is expected of them and rise to the occasion, according to teachers. Coaching and non-coaching teachers alike said that the coaches support academics, and that they encourage teachers to put students on the ineligible list if they are failing in their classes, even if an important game is approaching; coaches said they use this as an opportunity to "get on" students to do better in school to avoid letting down their teammates. Teachers said that they know their colleagues and their students so well that they all reinforce other teachers' expectations: "She [scolds] so and so for not finishing their art project. And I say 'How's your paper coming?' That makes the kids feel like everybody's looking out for everything." One teacher also said although the school does not place a lot of emphasis on test data, that he makes

students aware of how their school compares to others on state assessments, and that this makes them want to perform well so that they will be seen as successful. At Merino, high expectations extend to non-academic areas as well. For example, community members reported that there are also high expectations for student behavior, which helps students concentrate on academics and not on behavioral issues among their peers. The principal and teachers said that Merino is known for having students who win science and club competitions and win state and national leadership posts.

### *Teacher retention*

The principal and teachers noted that teacher retention is very high, which helps create a stable school climate and a feeling of bonding with their students, as they have them in class for multiple years. When asked why teachers tend to stay, many said that they are from the area and come back to teach because they are invested in the community. However, many teachers also said that they were free to conduct their classes the way they felt best, and that this level of autonomy makes them feel that they are trusted and valued. Teachers also mentioned that they felt supported by their colleagues, and that there was a sense of rapport and collaboration among the whole faculty. They also described a good working relationship with the administration, for example, being included in decisions about school policies such as block scheduling and graduation requirements. Overall, teachers said that the school environment empowers them and creates a sense of ownership, which encourages them to stay.

## Prevalent Themes

### *Administrative leadership*

Both teachers and administrators said that the nature of administrative leadership at Merino helps the school continue to be successful. According to teachers, the principal creates a comfortable environment for change and supports teachers' efforts to innovate. They said he is visionary in presenting new ideas, and then lets staff figure out whether or how to apply them. According to the principal, he shows the staff that he is willing to try new things, even if they fail, so that the teachers will also be willing to try new things. The principal described himself as a "service-leader type" who believes in shared decision-making and teacher leadership, does not see things in black and white, and believes in collaboration. He said, "I really believe that if you want buy-in and ownership from your school and community, they have to feel like they've been part of the process from the very beginning." Teachers agreed with this assessment. According to them, the administration has a lot of faith in teachers to do their jobs, and they appreciate the lack of micromanagement. Even though it makes for some long meetings, teachers confirmed that they liked being part of shared decision-making processes. One teacher said he also liked the fact that their administrative leaders stayed in place for a relatively long time so that they are able to see things through and take responsibility for their decisions.

Teachers said that the school board is forward-thinking as well. According to the principal, the school board has been willing to get professional development, become more knowledgeable about educational issues, participate in growth and outreach activities, and contribute to the national governing association of school boards. This attitude of not being content with the status quo sets the tone for the staff and the school. In turn, as school board members said, they are impressed and challenged by the accomplishments of Merino students to keep improving themselves.

## *Community support and involvement*

As with other rural schools, all respondents said that the school is essential to the community; if the school were closed, they believe the town would cease to exist. The community and the parents support the school, and, in turn, the teachers and students support the community. Residents attend school events, plays, and games even if they do not have children currently enrolled. Because people tend to be deeply rooted in the area, there are not many transient students, according to teachers. Area businesses provide financial support, according to community members, and parents are willing to volunteer in the school. Teachers said that they feel they can always count on the community to support them and the school. The school makes a priority of reaching out to the town as well. Local organizations frequently contact the school when they need help to see if their needs fit in with a class curriculum; for example, some students helped with ballot counting in a local election. Teachers said that students also help with children's activities in town and perform community service, such as delivering meals or Christmas baskets to needy families. The school encourages grandparents to attend activities by providing free admission to games and events.

While some rural schools focus only on their immediate surroundings, Merino extends the idea of "community" to the entire state. Teachers and administrators encourage students to enter state contests and participate in a state-level government participation program. School personnel take students to activities in the Front Range metropolitan area, such as dinner theater and skiing. Teachers also reach out through the Internet, for example, having science research students contact university professors to ask about their own research work. As the principal said, he is "trying to create more of an awareness of the world we're going to live in and how we have to interact and cooperate and help each other, rather than just our community."

## ***Culture of caring***

Parents, teachers, school board members, and the principal all described a culture of caring in the school. Parents, especially, said that it is obvious that teachers have “care and concern for each child,” and that at Merino, “People aren’t scared to show that they really love the kids.” One parent commented, “They love the kids and they’ll do whatever it takes to make it better for the kids. ... They laugh about changing, but they will change for the sake of the kids because the kids are the most important thing here at Merino.” Another remarked, “I don’t think you’ll find teachers that care about our students like ours do. I just think they go above and beyond their call of duty.” Parents said that because teachers feel that teaching is more than just a job, they give a lot of themselves and also expect a lot out of the students. Teachers get to know the students well, so students feel comfortable about coming in and chatting with them. Teacher-student relationships sometimes extend beyond graduation; some teachers send encouraging notes to recent graduates, and former students keep in touch with news about college and jobs. Teachers said that they also expect students to treat one another with respect. For example, one teacher gave students some guidelines for behavior at school dances, so that everyone is polite and no one feels excluded. The school considers character and how students act toward others, along with grades, in recommending membership in the National Honor Society. A school board member summed up the culture of caring by saying that the staff cares about the students, the community cares about the school, the parents care about the school and the staff, the board cares about the district, and the students care about relationships with one another.

## ***Extracurricular involvement***

At Merino, almost all students are involved in some kind of extracurricular activity, according to teachers. The principal said that students do well when they have an attachment to school beyond just attending classes. Because teachers coach and advise clubs, students form close

relationships with them; in turn, they perform better in classes because they do not want to disappoint their coaches and advisors. In addition, extracurriculars give students more opportunities for higher-level thinking and project-based work, along with leadership and social experience, said school personnel. The community is highly focused on sports, according to the principal, and pride in athletic achievement and concern for eligibility encourages students to keep their grades up. However, he said the community is also proud of student achievement in the state science fair and in other statewide competitions, and the well-known success of Merino's students in these areas carries over into other academic classes.

## Conclusions

Merino is a school that does not focus explicitly on testing but, nevertheless, scores highly. Their approach to achievement is broader, stricter graduation requirements, a tougher grading scale, a block schedule that allows students to focus more closely on fewer subjects, and a culture of excellence both in and out of the classroom. This is accompanied by a shared decision process that might be unwieldy in a larger school but is well suited to their close-knit group, as is the principal's autonomy-supporting leadership style. Merino takes advantage of their community support and the intimacy of their small school size but avoids insularity by embracing the cultural and educational opportunities of universities and the Denver metro area, and by remaining open to innovation and change.

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