Chapter 16
Extending Educational Opportunities in Rural Areas:
Application of Distance Education in Rural Schools

Wallace Hannum
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Matthew Irvin
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Claire de la Varre
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

ABSTRACT

Rural schools in many countries face problems in providing educational opportunities to children and youth for a variety of reasons. There has been the tendency in many countries to migrate to urban areas, often in search of better economic opportunities. The resulting shift from rural areas to urban/suburban areas has placed increased pressures on schools in rural communities. Schools often form the hub of social and civic activity in rural communities. Although they are an important component to rural communities, many rural schools are struggling under the weight of declining populations, declining budgets, staffing difficulties, and increased pressures to better prepare students for the workforce or further education. Rural schools face particular difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Faced with problems of providing a comprehensive curriculum and qualified teachers, many rural schools in the United States have turned to distance education. This case explores the use of distance education in the United States through a national survey of distance education use, analysis of barriers to distance education and an experimental study of enhancing distance education through more appropriate training of local facilitators to support students.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-751-0.ch016

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The National Research Center on Rural Education Support (NRCRES) was established in 2004 with funding from the Institute for Educational Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education. This center was based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. NRCRES conducts a focused program of research that addresses significant problems in rural education. More than 40% of all American schools are in rural areas and 30% of all students attend rural schools. The research and development work of NRCRES seeks solutions that will improve the quality of rural education. A number of issues limit the ability to make progress in rural education. The programs conducted by NRCRES address the following issues in rural education:

- retention of qualified teachers
- student achievement and dropout
- availability of and access to opportunities for advanced placement courses
- improvement in teacher quality through professional development

The approach taken by NRCRES is based on principles derived from empirical evidence. Through a series of research studies NRCRES addressed these issues that face rural education. A team of 20 researchers at NRCRES conducted research studies and implements training for teachers in participating rural schools. The purpose was to work toward improved teaching, learning and student achievement in rural schools nationwide. This, in turn, helps strengthen rural communities throughout the United States. The work involved collaboration among faculty and researchers at the School of Education, the Center for Developmental Science, and The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. The center housed multidisciplinary research on all aspects of human development by faculty from several colleges and universities. The Distance Education Program within the National Research Center on Rural Education Support was investigating the use of distance education in rural schools and the feasibility of offering advanced and upper-level courses though distance education. Distance education technology has changed a great deal over the last decades as communications technologies continue to evolve. These changes have resulted in a greater diversity in the type of delivery systems as well as possible differences in the effectiveness of types of delivery systems for differing courses.

SETTING THE STAGE

As in many countries, during the past several decades the population in the United States has tended to migrate from rural areas to the cities. While the cities have grown, a considerable segment of the population remains in rural communities despite the decline in the number of people engaged in farming and other economic pursuits associated with rural life. One impact of this shift from rural areas to urban/suburban areas has been increasing pressures on schools in rural communities. Schools often form the hub of social and civic activity in rural communities serving as the community center. They are an important component to rural communities, but many rural schools are struggling under the weight of declining populations, declining budgets, staffing difficulties, and increased pressures to better prepare students for the workforce or postsecondary education. While there may be some benefits from attending small rural schools (Huang & Howley, 1993; Howley, Strange, & Bickel, 2000; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2000; Johnson & Strange, 2007), many rural communities in the United States are losing population and losing jobs, which further impact rural schools. National assessment programs in the United States do not make distinctions between rural and urban/suburban schools in terms of expectations. The same standards that apply to larger and better-funded suburban schools apply equally to smaller, more remote and less well funded rural