



National Center for **Research** on
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Chance, P.L. & Segura, S.N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24 (5). Retrieved from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-5.pdf>

School reform is often called for but rarely implemented successfully, particularly at the high school level. For rural schools, the barriers to school reform are often greater, as they face more difficulties with resources and the recruitment and retention of quality teachers. The present study examined school reform in the context of Organization Development (OD), a structured approach that is managed from the top with the aim of improving organizational effectiveness. OD requires schools to problem-solve and work collaboratively to bring about changes. School leadership is the driving force behind such reforms.

The present study is a case study of a rural high school that demonstrated and sustained improvements in student achievement over a five-year period. Significant improvements were demonstrated by pass rates on high school proficiency examinations, achievement of Adequate Yearly Progress standards, and attendance and graduation rates. Such changes occurred as a result of deliberate, structured reform on the part of the school leadership. Data was collected from interviews, observations and documents reflective of the schools' progress (e.g., newsletters, yearly accreditation reports). Interviews with teachers, students and parents lasted about an hour and were completed using a semi-structured protocol that asked about perspectives on curriculum, instruction, the change process, problem-solving and involvement of different parties at various stages. Observations were conducted in all classrooms as well as during unstructured times (e.g., lunch, passing periods). Based on this case study, researchers concluded that both organizational practices and instructional leadership are necessary to create a collaborative environment that improves student outcomes. Three essential elements identified for successful collaboration were (a) scheduled time for teacher collaboration; (b) structured and focused collaboration time devoted to improving instruction and student achievement; and (c) leadership behaviors that focused on student-centered planning and accountability. A sense of community and contribution to the overall success of a school are important factors for successful school reform.

The researchers suggest that rural schools are uniquely poised to create a trusting and collaborative school climate that is conducive to reform. Rural communities have the advantage of smaller populations and, thus, denser relational networks, improving the likelihood that administrators, teachers, parents and students are already connected in vital ways. Additionally, because of these increased connections, rural schools are more likely to know about local resources that could contribute to school improvements. Finally, the shared values and sense of community increase the likelihood of various stakeholders working together to improve student achievement outcomes.