

## **NEW TRADITIONS: OPTIONS FOR RURAL HIGH SCHOOL EXCELLENCE**

**P-16 Council  
Agenda Item B-4  
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### **Information**

Kentucky was one of six states selected by the Southern Governors' Association to participate in a project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to visit high performing high schools whose successful practices could stimulate creative policy thinking and be replicated elsewhere.

During the month of May, representatives from participating states visited Swain County High School in Bryson City, North Carolina; Shaw High School in Shaw, Mississippi; Poland High School (part of the "Promising Futures" Program) in Poland, Maine; and Urban Academy in the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City. At each site, the state teams visited several classrooms and interviewed teachers, students, superintendents, counselors, board members, and other civic leaders to find model practices for use in the states. Sessions included special focus on rigorous and integrated curricula, the role of technology in teaching and learning, time and space planning, faculty development, funding practices, use of data to improve student learning, and creative partnerships (such as dual enrollment) with other educational sectors to raise the level of student achievement. In July, the state teams will reconvene in Atlanta at a forum of the SGA to review the applicability of the strategies they observed and to identify policy issues highlighted by these model schools.

Education Cabinet Deputy Secretary Mardi Montgomery will discuss this SGA/Gates project and its implications for Governor Fletcher's education agenda.

## SGA Proposal to the Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation

**Project Description**

This project is intended to (1) expose Southern education leaders to high performing schools that prompt out-of-the-box thinking on how to successfully ensure high academic expectations for every high school student and high performing small, rural schools that may represent alternatives to consolidation, (2) expose these leaders to high-performing schools that bear enough similarities in terms of their policy context to be considered as models for replication in their states and (3) further equip states with a list of rural high schools in their region, prepared by an outside entity and based on objective data, that are successfully preparing their students for the academic rigors of college.

The initial suggestion that education leaders in Southern states visit some model rural schools to see first-hand innovative ways schools are overcoming the challenges inherent in rural education met with immediate and enthusiastic response from governors. When a request went out to governors' offices for any who were interested in this prospect to name an education advisor to work with SGA on a proposal, all 16 mainland governors quickly named an advisor. In discussion of the particular schools that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has identified as models, advisors were interested in alternative ways of demonstrating achievement in Minnesota, school financing in Maine, experience-based learning in Alaska and other strategies that have been critical to high achievement in these schools. In talking about their governors' goals to ensure that all students are prepared for further study, work and citizenship, the advisors felt strongly that, while useful, these site visits would be of even greater value in helping formulate ideas for and build a case for bold experimentation within their states if they were accompanied by a couple of other elements. It is in thinking about those tools as well that this project was envisioned.

***Visiting Model Schools to Promote their Replication & to Promote Creative Thinking About Education Challenges and Options*** – The Gates Foundation model of identifying schools that are successful and then telling their stories to provoke out-of-the-box thinking about ways to structure high schools and to encourage replication of successful models is one that resonates with Southern governors. People are interested to see bold new ideas in action and in their minds, the more replicable the model, the better. With this in mind, governors' advisors felt strongly that the majority of schools selected for site visits should be selected while bearing in mind four specific realities about the context into which reform must be proposed within their states.

***Cost Factors*** – Several Southern governors have been able to boost funding for K-12 education in recent years. However, others have tried mightily though not yet succeeded to persuade their constituents and legislators that additional funds are needed in their states for K-12 education. With a keen awareness that several Southern governors have proposed additional funding for K-12 education in their FY05 budgets and are campaigning hard within their states and legislatures for its approval and that governors will continue for the foreseeable future to try to address this underlying issue, the reality

is that many Southern states have very limited education dollars. Site visits to places where the fiscal realities are vastly different may spark creativity but because of states' eagerness to see models that they will be more likely to be able to implement in the short-term, they think it is most valuable for the majority of schools they visit to conform more rather than less to their own budgetary realities.

*Policy Circumstances* – Most Southern states have high-stakes assessment and accountability and to the extent that schools intended as models for replication do not share a similar policy environment, such models are more problematic in terms of replication. A specific example of this is that several Southern states do not have charter laws and that some also do not have teacher collective bargaining rights. This is not to say that a model requiring both those laws would not be of any value to a state without them but given a particular state's policy circumstances, certain models will inherently have greater applicability as they seek to identify strategies for their underperforming rural schools.

*Demographics* – Most Southern states are racially quite diverse not only in their urban but also in their rural areas. Hispanic, Black, and Native American students attend school in rural areas in substantial numbers in the South. By 2014, The College Board estimates over 50% of graduates in the South will be a “minority majority” comprised of Hispanic, Black, and Asian/Pacific Islanders. A second demographic reality about the South and the rural South in particular is its poverty. The College Board reports that more than 20% of high school students in the South come from families with less than \$20,000 in annual income. From the rural perspective, the U.S. Department of Agriculture says almost 18% of “non-metro” residents in the South are poor compared with 5% of “metro” residents. According to the USDA's Economic Research Service, rural areas have higher poverty rates, fewer college graduates, lower average earnings, fewer year round, full-time jobs and more low-skill jobs. Governors are committed to equalizing the opportunities for all citizens through the strongest possible education system but if they ignore the potent issues of class and race in the process, they do so at their own peril. To convince some education leaders, some of the public at large and in some instances perhaps even the students or other members of local communities themselves that high achievement for all students regardless of income or race is possible, few things would be as powerful as seeing schools where the demographics are similar to their own. The Julia Richman Education Complex has captured the interest of many Southern states in part because of its demographic similarity and because of the perceived replicability of its strategy to break down a large, under-performing school and re-create it as several different schools. The existence of compelling objective records of the students' academic achievement in this environment also contributes significantly to governors' advisors belief that this school has strong possibilities as a model for those in their states.

*Value of Sound Models in Neighboring States* —Gubernatorial leadership is necessary to bring about reform in Southern states, but alone it is not sufficient. State legislators, teachers' union leaders and education superintendents, all people whose tenures extend beyond those of a governor, have considerable control over these issues in many Southern states. In thinking about the intra-state challenges of building consensus around

education reform for rural high schools, a fundamental unanswered question that is a starting point for many of these players at the state level is “Are there rural high schools in our region (i.e., in states with similar policy, demographic and fiscal circumstances) that are graduating students at high rates prepared for further study, employment and citizenship and, if so, which schools are they and how are they doing it?”

And while there is an interest in finding ideas that work wherever they are, the truth is that some of the most significant education reforms in the states in recent years have been borne out of an innovation in one state and modification of that idea in neighboring states. Constituents in one state are often unaware of policy innovations in other regions but they typically know about the innovations next-door. It is therefore often easier for leaders and candidates to gain support for such proposals when pointing to the results that the neighboring state has begun to achieve. A prominent example of this phenomenon is North Carolina’s creation of the Smart Start program to invest in early childhood education in the early 1990s, which paved the way for similar investments in Georgia, South Carolina, Kentucky, Florida, Oklahoma, and most other neighboring states. Similarly, Georgia’s creation of its merit-based HOPE scholarship program engendered 12 similar programs mostly in southern states (West Virginia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Florida, South Carolina, Maryland and Tennessee).

The fact that policy innovation often spreads particularly quickly in a regional context is not unique to the South. It is a natural phenomenon borne out of the greater similarities within regions in their states’ constitutions, demographics and economies. In thinking about site visits that would be most powerful in convincing state education leaders that significant change was possible, governors’ advisors thought that seeing a neighbor’s success could prove very enticing. In particular, they thought that visiting a couple of high performing school selected by independent organizations focusing closely on those with strong records of academic achievement in difficult circumstances (similar to their own) would be invaluable. It would be a way to use this phenomenon to their advantage.

### ***Further Policy Research***

Surprisingly, despite the number of organizations engaged in education policy work in Southern states (SREB, the Rural Trust, the Education Commission of the States, the Appalachian Regional Commission, etc.), no one has done the work necessary to give an answer that can stand up to serious scrutiny to the afore-mentioned question, “Are there rural high schools in our region (i.e., in states with similar policy, demographic and fiscal circumstances) that are graduating students at high rates prepared for further study, employment and citizenship and, if so, which schools are they and how are they doing it?” With state departments of education having their research capacity pared back in recent years, this work is not likely to occur at the state level. Moreover, governors’ advisors believe that the work would be more valuable if performed by an independent organization. But there is a strong belief that this information is critically important for states as they proceed down the path to reform.

The goal in obtaining this information is strictly utilitarian, not self-promotional. It comes from a concern that while Southern states have made the greatest gains in SAT and ACT test scores in recent years, rural schools in the region are not faring as well as their urban and suburban counterparts. This work is needed to identify as many models as possible of what would work or make sense in the policy context of these states.

Specifically, states believe that this piece should be focused on identifying rural schools within the region that are doing the best job in challenging circumstances (with high poverty and/or high minority student bodies) which presumably (because their policy circumstances would bear more similarities than differences) would be more easily replicable in their states.

### **Goals/Objectives**

The goal of this project is to provide southern state education leaders with new ways of thinking and as many models as possible to spur conversation in their states about meeting the challenge of under-performing rural high schools.

The project's objectives are to (1) engage education leaders in the South in an extended conversation and re-thinking of visions of success for rural high schools and their students, (2) provide an opportunity for these leaders to see first-hand rural schools that have overcome similar challenges and achieved success, (3) discern transferable lessons and strategies used by these successful rural schools, and (4) fill a void by identifying high-performing rural high schools in the South, thus giving state leaders a critical tool for mobilizing reform efforts in their states.

Due to the logistical difficulties involved in having large groups of people visit a school at one time without disrupting the activity they came to see, it was determined that only six states would participate in the site visit component of the proposed project. All states would be invited to participate in the final forum, wherein they would have an opportunity to hear site visit participants talk about their impressions of the schools visited and the applicability of various strategies observed. In order to reduce the number of states interested in participating (16) down to six, SGA suggested that states which might want to remove themselves from consideration for the site visit component of the project were those that were relatively less rural and/or less poor than other Southern states and those where the governor had less time left in office than others. The states still being considered among the six to participate in the site visit component of the project would be Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia.

### **Project Activities**

This project would be carried out via the following activities:

**(1) Governors from 6 states would appoint teams to engage in an extended conversation about the challenges facing rural high schools in the South along with proven strategies for overcoming those challenges.** Governors from six SGA member

states would each be invited to appoint four (4) trusted advisors and/or key players on education in their state to serve on his/her state team for this Southern Rural High School Innovation Initiative. Each governor would also be asked to name two co-chairs for his/her team. Governors may want to appoint to this team an education policy advisor, chief state school officer, key legislator, superintendent, other education practitioner (particularly those whose districts are high-performing in a challenging environment), and/or rural education or other related organization leader in their communities, or they may want to appoint someone who is not part of the established education community in their state. While governors would have discretion in designing their state's team, they would be encouraged to include people with openness to new thinking on the issues before them including those who believe that small rural high schools can be high performing.

**(2) Enable gubernatorial teams to witness high-performing high schools to spark creativity and to encourage replication.** Gubernatorial teams would visit 4 high-performing high schools as part of this initiative. Based upon a determination by the 6 states, one of those site visits would be to a rural school that has already been identified by the Gates Foundation as a model (Chugach in Alaska, New Country in Minnesota or "Promising Futures" in Maine). Another visit would be made to New York City to see the Julia Richman Education Complex. The Southern Regional Education Board and the Rural Schools and Community Trust would each select one of the two remaining schools for site visits. In doing so, they would ensure that these two schools have high test scores and strong results, that the majority of the students are low-income and/or minority, and that the schools embody a plethora of transferable strategies for other rural high schools in the region. Other characteristics such as leadership at the building and district level, ties to the community, the type of learning community created would also factor into their selection. All of the site visits would include activities such as observing student work in the classroom and in the field and talking with students, parents, teachers, board members, school and district leaders, and community leaders. The role of technology in the success of each of these schools would also be explored during the site visits. Also explored would be issues related to each school's financing.

**(3) Conducting a survey of rural high schools in the South that have high-poverty and/or high-minority student bodies and that are high performing.** In an effort to answer the question about which rural high schools in the South have high achievement in difficult circumstances (and how they are doing this), this project would take advantage of the expertise of the Rural Trust and the Southern Regional Education Board. Each of those organizations would develop criteria for identifying such schools, work with their databases to identify approximately 25 schools who appear to meet all of those criteria and then visit 5 schools on each of their lists. These site visits, combined with the Rural Trust and SREB's recent visits in the course of their work to other schools that rise to the top during the database work, will produce a list of at least 10-15 schools that can serve as model rural high schools in the South.

The goal of identifying these schools would be two-fold: (1) to provide governors and others with objectively identified model schools that they can visit and from which they

can learn and (2) to provide governors and others with examples of good schools that they can celebrate to share the vision of achievement for all students and to help make the case for continued investment in their schools.

For the purposes of this survey, “rural high schools” would be defined as those in communities of 25,000 or less. “High-poverty” would be a school in a high poverty county as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, with additional review to remove any schools within a county where the income level is an aberration. “High-minority” will be defined as having more than a 40% minority student population.

To maximize the ability of this project to address the range of under-performing schools and the range of communities in which they are situated across the region, two surveys will be conducted: one by SREB and one by the Rural Trust. Each organization would craft a definition of “high-performing” based on their expertise in this area. The criteria would meet or exceed current state standards of accountability.

SREB would expect to include in those criteria rural high school completion rates, test scores, college going rates and college readiness, along with a rigorous curriculum, culture of expectations and leadership. The Rural Trust would expect to look at schools that use the principles of place-based education to help students meet or exceed state learning standards, encourage citizenship by actively involving students in the issues of their rural communities, fully engage the community in the work of the school, have low dropout rates, support continuing professional development of teachers and common planning time, partner with higher education institutions to improve teaching and school leadership as well as engage students who are able to do college-level work, and use technology in appropriate ways.

Using these criteria, SREB and the Rural Trust will then identify all of the schools in their databases in the South that fit their definition of “high-performing.” Other organizations that would be consulted and involved as appropriate in the course of doing this work would include the: Education Commission of the States, Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools at the University of Oklahoma, National Rural Education Association, NWREL, Rural Education Research Program, Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, ERIC Clearinghouse for Rural and Small Schools (a subsidiary of the Appalachia Education Laboratory) and other organizations suggested by the state teams or otherwise identified as possessing relevant expertise.

**(4) Holding a final forum for the 6 states participating in the project to discuss their impressions of the site visits and the applicability of the strategies they saw in action.**

Following the site visits, governors’ appointees would be asked to take their findings home, consider what they have seen in relation to their state circumstances, discuss among themselves and discern which strategies have the greatest applicability in their states and best respond to the challenges they face. State team members would then meet (with representatives from all other SGA governors, who would be invited to attend the final forum) to share their observations, to discuss opportunities and challenges for replicating identified strategies and to talk about approaches for building sufficient

support within their respective states for reform efforts. Two of the topics that time would be devoted to discussing would be the role of technology in the successful rural high school and the financing of successful rural schools.

**(5) Developing a set of papers on policy options for meeting the challenges facing rural high schools in the South and incorporating those options into a final project report.** Upon the conclusion of the four site visits and the forum, SREB and the Rural Trust would each develop a paper on the policy options identified through the site visits. Because SREB and the Rural Trust bring related but different perspectives and background to this work, it is believed that rather than having them try to write something together, it would be more efficient to have them each prepare a paper, both of which would be used as preliminary documents by a contracted writer (who would also participate in the four site visits) who would work with SGA to craft the final report. The report would articulate the challenges facing under-performing rural high schools in the region, articulate the variety of strategies for overcoming the challenges to revitalizing rural high schools, discuss the role of financing in rural school success, contain descriptive vignettes of all four site visits as well as of the schools the Rural Trust and SREB visited first-hand as part of this project, contain a list of the additional rural high schools (approximately 10-12) that have been identified through this project as model schools and summarize the forum discussions about opportunities and challenges to using the various strategies.

In an effort to provide workable options for under-performing rural high schools throughout the region, this information would be compiled not as a precise recipe for success but as sources from which a maximum number of strategies and options can be derived.

By combining the work of both SREB and the Rural Trust, the report will offer a flexible definition of high performance that allows governors and other state policy makers to have a clearer picture of what quality rural high school education looks like and could look like in their states. SGA will coordinate the review and editing of the report in consultation with SREB and the Rural Trust. In addition, SREB will develop a paper outlining technology innovations and uses in rural schools that improve opportunities for academic achievement.

**(6) Strongly promoting and widely distributing the findings of this project to achieve maximum impact on thinking about rural high schools in the South to create a new sense of possibility for these schools and a renewed commitment to achieving high performance for them all.** The final report from this project would be announced and discussed at SGA's annual meeting in September, with an opportunity for individual governors to respond to the report and discuss how they may use it to inform agendas for rural schools in their states. Significant public relations efforts would be undertaken and coordinated among SGA, SREB and the Rural Trust to gain maximum attention to the report as well as to share it with other groups (the Southern Legislative Conference, Education Commission of the States, Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, etc.). SGA, SREB and the Rural Trust would also make their

staff available to governors with an interest in convening meetings in their states to discuss the report.

### **Timeline/Milestones**

The goal is to complete this project in time for governors to incorporate lessons from it into their plans for the 2005 legislative sessions.

Upon receipt of the grant, SGA would immediately begin work to facilitate governors' appointments to the teams for this project. The Rural Trust and SREB would immediately begin work to each identify a school for a site visit. The four site visits would be arranged for April and May.

Simultaneously, the Rural Trust and SREB would begin work validating and establishing their criteria for high-performing schools and working with their databases to identify as many such schools as possible in the region. This work would be completed in July, with a final summit meeting to take place during the summer and the results of the project shared with all Southern governors at the SGA annual meeting in September 2004.

### **Sustainability**

To the extent that this project influences reform efforts in individual Southern states, its influence will continue to be felt in neighboring states for years to come if those efforts yield positive results. The report itself will provide a critical tool for individual states and their leaders when undertaking efforts to enhance performance in their rural high schools.