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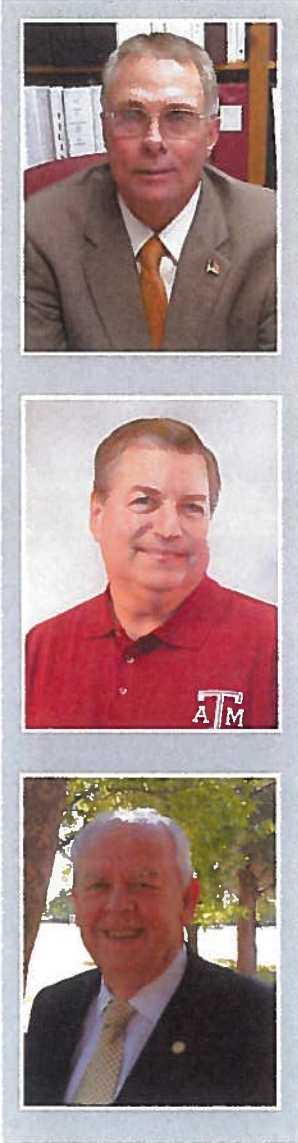
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A VIEW FROM A RURAL SUPERINTENDENT'S CORNER OF THE WORLD: SMALL TOWN, BIG DREAMS

by Kim D. Alexander, Gary E. Briers and Glen C. Shinn



Rural schools, like many Texas highways, are “Caution – Road Work Ahead.”

Futurists describe a rapidly changing society in the 21st century. Communicated as grand challenges with immediate implications for Texas are education, energy, environment, food, water and disease (Smalley, 2003). Although the landscapes in which they live are different, rural parents — like their urban counterparts — hold aspirations for their children and want a safe, healthy environment with the instruction that meets their children’s educational needs.

Competence is expected in individualizing the learning environment for their children and encouraging aspiration, curiosity and grit. Even in rural settings, schools are a part of an interdependent, interconnected, global society, and it is our responsibility to prepare students to be contributing citizens in tomorrow’s world.

Cooley and Floyd (2013) concluded, “There is substantial evidence ... that the public education system has reached the point where continued improvement will not be possible absent significant changes, whether that change takes the form of increased funding, improved efficiencies, or better methods of education,” (p. 46). Change is coming, but people often don’t like change, especially when they think they will lose from it.

In response, Roscoe Collegiate ISD (RCISD) has invested nine years in the evolution of a P-20 systemic model for 21st Century School Transformation in Texas. The P-20 model spans pre-kindergarten through associate degrees or industry certifications. Expectations are that a large portion of grade 14 (associate degrees) completers will flow seamlessly in higher education through grade 16 (baccalaureate degrees), and many of those will complete master’s, doctoral and/or professional degrees (grade 20) — thus the moniker “P-20.”

This approach enables RCISD to better provide students with integrated resources that include two integrated STEM-based themes — biomedical sciences and engineering — that fit our community and are necessary for students to engage in a more globally competitive educational and workforce environment. RCISD has achieved the goal to sustain 90 percent or greater of each class to complete the blended model associate degree through Roscoe Collegiate and Western Texas College. A long-range goal is for RCISD to become a model that can be replicated by other small and rural schools.

Why education is crucial for small schools and rural Texas

Education is big business. Texas is increasingly engaged in a global economy that depends on skilled knowledge-workers. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) oversees approximately 1,250 public and charter school districts enrolling more than 5 million students. Twenty-nine percent of the state’s

students are enrolled in 18 of the largest school districts. On the other hand, small and rural districts make up 730 school districts. Seventeen percent (834,000) of the state's students are enrolled in small and rural districts. Additionally, almost half of the rural student population is considered low income and often lack role models (Rosser, 2014; TEA, 2017). Currently, only 20 percent of Texas eighth graders will earn a college degree or an advanced certificate within six years after high school. The THECB 60x30TX strategic plan is to have 60 percent of Texans between the ages of 25 and 34 hold a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030. The current number is 38 percent; that's a 22 percent change-gap that reduces Texas' global competitiveness.

Rural schools face similar infrastructural shifts as do urban schools — population change, intergenerational poverty, violence, limited access to advancing technologies, disruptive policies and school migration. Add yet another major rural challenge — attracting qualified administrators and teachers who are willing to embrace new methods and practices. Innovative solutions need risk-reduction, hands-on approaches and continuous integration. Inequality of access to powerful knowledge is compounded by a lack of engagement and reflection.

By 2030, two-thirds of the world will live in cities — intensifying demands on energy, environment, food, water and other renewable resources. Clearly, there is a need to continue to improve. The difficult questions become how and when?

What appears to be happening has already happened

Recognizing that a good educational start is crucial, the P-20 model begins with developmentally appropriate activities from among a prescribed range of options. The pre-K learning environment encourages curiosity, exploration, discovery, social behavior and uninterrupted blocks of “work time.” Activities morph into interests in language, math and music supporting “reading, writing and arithmetic.” Beginning with fourth graders, the project method serves as a basis for learning-teaching, but the model continues to use a variety of developmentally-appropriate methods incorporated into a student-centered curriculum.

Partners — including community colleges, universities, businesses, consultants and foundations — work directly with P-20 schools and school districts in educating/mentoring students. Education and training strategies include shifting toward analyzing and synthesizing knowledge from remembering and memorizing for the test.

A long journey begins with the first steps — essential school-based elements and partners — that include a focus on:

- specialized staffing — getting and rewarding the right people on the bus;
- AVID—Advancement Via Individual Determination;
- aspirations and expectations of individual students and their parents/guardians;
- personal/individual learning pathways;
- extended learning time, creative problem-solving and lifelong learning;
- STEM disciplines, industry certifications and transferable skills; and
- partnering with colleges and universities to access distributed degrees and certificates.

The design principles are:

- fostering family and community engagement;
- leading with a clear vision and shared decision-making;

- building effective partnerships;
- designing a rigorous, relevant and focused curriculum;
- creating an integrated college experience;
- creating an integrated workplace experience; and
- building a strong, collaborative teaching faculty.

The five-year RCISD Collegiate Edu-Vet plan (2016) recognized four constraints:

- the diseconomies of scale between large urban schools and small rural schools;
- short-range economic changes that impact long-range strategies compelling schools to do more with less. Poverty makes it difficult for families to provide the resources children need.
- politics often change the focus of the curriculum and student achievement measures without sufficient attention to academic aspiration, performance and development; and,
- societal and cultural constraints include safety, nutrition, health, crime, drugs and limited public-private partnerships.

To drive real change, schools must partner with the community to create social innovations that benefit individual students, local businesses and the public good.

Gibbs (2000) warned that rural schools face impediments of small size, lack of specialization and generational poverty. Lacking role models, rural youth are less likely to be academically prepared for and attend college. Cooley and Floyd (2013) offered consolidation of small and rural schools as a solution by absorbing or joining districts. However, physical distance, expenditures per pupil and loss of rural communities may be offset by leveraging connectivity, convergence and emerging technologies coupled with distributed course/degree delivery.

At the onset, RCISD was partially supported by Educate Texas, a public/private partnership established by the governor's office to support Early Colleges, T-STEM and STEM Academies. As a result of the developmental process, the district moved from an independent school district into a system model approach. It was the goal of Educate Texas for the Roscoe Collegiate Model to be replicated by other small and rural schools.



Early on, members of the Roscoe Collegiate System included the original two-year higher education partners, Western Texas College in Snyder and Texas State Technical College in Sweetwater. Over time, the district added a four-year university partnership with Angelo State University, as well as system partnerships with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, Texas 4H and the Texas Tech T-STEM Center.

Over a nine-year period of development, the P-20 model has strengthened educational differentiation. Six interventions supported RCISD's ability to outperform its competitors: Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID, 2017), Common Instructional Framework, Instructional Coaches

and Common Planning, Harvard Instructional Rounds, the Third-90 (poverty issues) and project-based learning in relevant STEM areas of biomedical science, including One Health and engineering, including robotics and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's).

Agriculture industries and engineering technologies are the contexts of the living, working and learning environments of Nolan County, Texas. RCISD provides learning pathways through biomedical sciences and engineering. Featured in the 2016 business plan, the biomedical pathways include clinical, one-health, laboratory and business certificates through the Collegiate EduVet Teaching Hospital and certifications through the Texas Veterinary Medicine Association (TVMA). Similarly, engineering pathways include airborne innovations for unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) through the EduDrone curriculum.

The Education Design Lab (2016) recommended, "If (Texas) higher ed wants to stay ahead of this curve, it should grow its access and opportunities specifically to help at-risk jobholders (students) retool early and often. Even for those in safer fields, the rate of change has created very complex environments in most fields, so teaching ... creative problem solving has been cited in IBM's global CEO survey as the biggest capacity need going forward." Carr (2010) reported "about 60 percent of CEOs polled cited creativity as the most important leadership quality, compared with 52 percent for integrity and 35 percent for global thinking. Creative leaders are also more prepared to break with the status quo of industry, enterprise and revenue models, and they are 81 percent more likely to rate innovation as a 'crucial capability.'"

Is it working?

Aspirations and expectations — creating a new reality for learners of all ages — are crucial for school transformation and community sustainability. In an exit poll of the 29 recently graduating seniors, we learned that 19 were optimistic for an improving quality of life in 2022 while six forecasted a constant lifestyle and three were pessimistic. Nineteen seniors planned to earn a Bachelor of Science degree within six semesters (2019). Sixteen estimated their first semester grades to be A's and B's. After college graduation, eight students indicated a preference to live within 50 miles of Roscoe while 11 preferred within 250 miles. Recalling "yesterday," 17 seniors remember smiling or laughing a lot, and 27 thought they have family or friends they could count on to help whenever they needed them. Another benefit is the absence of educational debt while earning the associate degree. Parents are also smiling a lot.

The P-20 model focuses on developing resilience and reducing dependency. Generational poverty is diminished with relevant, rigorous education and positive role-model relationships.

There are no silver bullets — one size does not fit all — but innovation at the community level and core elements of education and training provide rural triage to combat illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. ■

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