

## A Three-Circle Process for Rural School Renewal

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Getting new educational programs into use in Arkansas was never a problem. Small rural school districts predominate, and they are always eager for new programs and resources. The problem was to keep the programs in place; the new ideas came and went as quickly as the funding.

To overcome this dilemma, the Arkansas Department of Education worked with three rural districts to develop an interactive process of school improvement called ERMA (Educational Renewal Model for Arkansas). A local district makes the decision to participate and sets up the mechanism to involve teachers and community; the linker serves as advocate, problem solver, and connection with the necessary outside resources. The Department of Education becomes the response or access system that locates and arranges the resources that the linker funnels back into the district (Figure 1).

### ERMA's Evolution

When the project started three years

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ago, skills were low to nonexistent in all three circles. Each of the three pilot districts, Wynne, Sheridan, and Kingston, held faculty meetings and organized renewal councils. They dealt first with four questions:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to go?
3. How do we get from here to there?
4. How will we know when we have arrived?

As the districts compared notes and learned more about planning, their questions became more complex. A state renewal team, composed of facilitators and project directors, met regularly, sometimes with consultants, to discuss what was happening.

To meet increased demand for research-based information, the Arkansas Department of Education consolidated its information resource center, the National Diffusion Network service, and its communication unit into a single division. This has become an easy-to-use response system for school improvement for all districts in the state, as well as those involved in renewal.

The field facilitators from this consolidated center serve as the linkers who help school districts analyze their needs, serve as catalysts to keep the renewal process active, and connect each district with services to match its needs. For

now, linkers are field-based but eventually they will be located in district cooperatives or service centers.

### ERMA's Results

ERMA is a flexible model that respects the ability of school district staffs to make good decisions about change. Its success shows that if people are involved in identifying problems and finding solutions, they have a higher commitment to make the solutions work.

We have found that with ERMA:

1. Communications have improved and most problems are solved at much lower levels.
2. Districts have become more creative in finding solutions.
3. Staffs in renewal schools have become better users of information and research.

Renewal has taken such a firm hold on the pilot districts that it is being continued at their own expense. One of the superintendents observed that it would be difficult to stop the process even if he wanted to, which he did not. Having grown accustomed to shared planning and decision making, he has found it an effective way to keep his district moving ahead. ■

Figure 1. Model of Interactive Process for ERMA.



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