

## School Improvement in a Rural State

The University of Vermont has collaborated with local districts to bring master's degree programs to the rural areas where educators live and work. Teachers' and administrators' graduate work is tied directly to local improvement projects.

Rural schools have been less quick than urban districts to initiate reform. Historically, rural schools have served a simple purpose: they ensured basic literacy and vocational skills for students who tended to remain within a relatively simple rural economy. With the decline in the agricultural and timber industries, Vermont's mostly rural schools have

lacked the money to pursue elaborately conceived reform schemes. Still, the tradition of "making do with what you have," which drives most rural cultures, can provide fertile ground for leadership in the process of change.

Vermont school districts and the University of Vermont have formed school improvement collaboratives to improve instruction and supervision.

After five years of developmental work, school improvement projects across the state appear to be showing effects in student achievement.

### Adapting the University Role

To create support for improvement, in 1981 the University of Vermont decided to revise its relationship with state schools. To reach across natural

*Rural school districts have begun to compensate for scarce resources by tapping into the expertise of local universities, resulting in an integrated approach to school reform. Here, a University of Vermont professor discusses with Hardwick teachers characteristics of evergreen fauna for later use with pupils at the Barr Hill Nature Conservatory.*



## Mapping Education Partnerships

While the 11 off-campus sites have common bonds, they are all results of campus-local collaboration: they all have master's programs. It is their variety of histories and formats that weave a growing success story for education in Vermont.

Kenneth Fishell, associate vice president for outreach, sums up the philosophy behind the flexibility in off-campus programs: "It's not that the course content varies to meet local needs. It's the process of instruction which changes, by on-going negotiations and agreement, so that participants can apply course content to the solution of the problems within their schools."

education courses on campus for local teachers. Individuals living close to Burlington drove to town once a week to attend a three-hour class. After completing required readings, participating in discussions, and writing a ten-page paper, they would go back to work. As their individual interests and the requirements for teacher recertification might dictate, teachers chose courses one at a time. By the time the college began to work with school improvement, most teachers in the Burlington area had received master's degrees. None of these degrees, however, represented a coherent body of skills and knowledge organized to help the schools improve the achievement of Vermont's children.

Serving the children has meant working with the school, rather than the individual teacher, as the primary client. To work with the schools, the university first had to develop a relationship in which shared values created an atmosphere of trust.

## Flexible Support for School Improvement

The university has a four-pronged support system of services for school improvement. The first service helps a school district achieve organizational readiness, providing interested school leaders (principals, superintendents, and school board members) with a chance to consider approaches to school development in light of their needs. The second service is inspirational, creating a common vision among teachers, school leaders, and community members that illuminates some common goals and leads to general consensus about the need for change. The third support element, by far the most extensive, consists of credit courses or institutes within two master's degree programs that can be transported to teachers and administrators across the state. Finally, the support system includes the brokering of the technical services needed to fine-tune and integrate specific components of locally designed improvement projects as they evolve. For any school system, the mix, timing, and texture of these four elements emerge slowly through negotiation between people from the university and people from the schools.

To create a state of organizational readiness, the schools and the univer-



Fig. 1. Eleven Off-campus Sites for Master's Programs

boundaries, the University redesigned its graduate-level curriculum and administrative structure so schools would have greater access to training despite their isolation. The university's College of Education and Social Services has:

1. become a broker of services for the schools, arranging support for school improvement efforts at the local level;

2. redesigned two of its master's degree programs so that they can be used to support school improvement projects;

3. provided courses, institutes, consultants, and technical assistance to schools throughout the state;

4. replaced a static curriculum with a process of negotiated program design;

5. assigned an assistant dean to the task of tailoring plans to the needs of local schools.

In their new reciprocal relationship, the university and the schools collaborate in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of school improvement projects, but control over the improvement process remains with the school.

The university has had to suspend most of the conventions that typified its relationship with the schools prior to 1981. For years, the University of Vermont had offered continuing edu-



sity have relied on a number of preparatory techniques. Members of the college dean's office and faculty may meet with a school board over a period of time to create the sense of common direction, commitment, and legitimacy necessary to a school improvement drive. In different circumstances, teams from the college may meet with all the school principals within a district to begin preliminary evaluations, clarify expectations, and start a planning process. The college may arrange sabbaticals for superintendents, who take up temporary residence at the university, and sets up exchanges of superintendents or principals and university faculty. The early involvement of school board members and superintendents has proven essential to the development of successful projects. A school district is ready to begin the change process when its policy groups have accepted change as their major purpose.

Finding a central vision that can inspire all school personnel to engage in a collective effort occurs most simply when a principal or superintendent gathers the entire staff in a gym or motel meeting room to hammer out that vision. Ideally, such group meetings include the entire teaching staff, board members, bus drivers, cooks, and custodial personnel. Some staff groups find it easy to define the common values they want the whole school to represent. Other school groups have had to start with a narrower goal, like creating a writing curriculum or a reliable discipline procedure, before moving to larger tasks.

### **Master's Degree Programs as a Change Medium**

Once a school has decided on a general direction, two master's degrees—one in administration and planning, the other in curriculum and instruction—provide the medium for developing specific projects in school improvement. Both degree programs rely on a research-based change model consistent with the school effectiveness literature. Both degree options can be carried out within a school district or a cooperating network of districts. Either degree program can be introduced to a district through a single umbrella course that conveys the fundamental principles of re-

**"In their new reciprocal relationship, the university and the schools collaborate in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of school improvement projects, but control over the improvement process remains with the school."**

search-based change and the findings from effective schools research. All courses within both 30-hour curriculums require practical projects that are

carried out within the school setting (see fig. 1).

These master's programs have been designed to complement each other. For example, the courses in curriculum design fit with the courses in program evaluation, supervision, or planning. The "project" is the common denominator of all courses. Designed within the course framework, individual or small-group projects are carried back into the school for testing and evaluation. Over time, projects carried out by many teachers and administrators in the master's degree programs begin to constitute a school improvement drive, particularly when the superintendent and principals take an active role in planning a course sequence that supports a districtwide

### **A Case in Point: Hardwick, Vermont**

Even within the constraints of a rural economy, collaborating school districts are beginning to see the effects of their school improvement programs in rising national test scores. In Hardwick, one of Vermont's most impoverished counties, numbers of low-scoring students fell from 38 to 26 percent between 1981 and 1985, while students scoring above the 70th percentile increased from 30 to 41 percent.

Hardwick began its improvement drive in 1982 when the new superintendent started "managing by walking about" among the tiny community schools that feed students to the district's consolidated high school. When the university offered its first school improvement institute in Burlington, the superintendent sent ten of his most promising teachers and school leaders. Working with the university, he then imported to his district a four-credit course on the assessment techniques derived from effective schools research. As his teachers began to recognize patterns in student learning, he asked the first of many curriculum task teams to design a K-12 curriculum in writing. To support their work, the superintendent brought in a three-credit course in curriculum planning. Teams in math, science, and foreign languages also enrolled in that course. School improvement had begun in Vermont's most rural area.

More three-credit courses followed, along with an invitation to teachers from other districts to participate, which reduced tuition for Hardwick teachers. When technology emerged as an issue in course design, the superintendent imported a course on computer literacy. As his teaching staff began to put parts of the K-12 curriculum into place, he brought in one course on cooperative learning and another on writing across the disciplines.

He took several groups of teachers to Johnson City, New York, to compare the Hardwick approach with an urban approach. Johnson City teachers and administrators returned the visits. Teachers who participated in the original institutes now co-teach university courses in the Hardwick district. They have traveled to a dozen neighboring communities to help develop a research base or design process. The results of Hardwick's improvement program have been promising. Achievement scores have been rising steadily at the elementary level. In the high school, a mathematics teacher, active in the project since its beginning, was recognized nationally as one of the 100 best teachers of 1984. Last year, a Hardwick social studies teacher became a finalist for NASA's "teacher in space" program, and the high school achieved recognition as one of the 100 best in a national study of effective schools.

For Hardwick, school improvement has begun to cross the boundaries that divide rural districts. The most active districts and the university have joined Hardwick in forming a collaborative in which expertise compensates for scarce resources.

—By John Clarke and Ken Hood

## Leadership and the Rural School

Leadership is the key to change in a rural school. With skillful leadership, the aspects of rural life that limit the potential for reform can become sources of strength in the change process.

### Geographic Isolation

Rurality compresses the energy of a community. The school is the center of community activity, housing 4H, bingo night, and the firemen's auxiliary dinner. Purposeful leadership can focus community attention on learning.

### Cultural Isolation

Rurality prevents diffusion of effort. Town leaders, school board members, teachers, students, and parents collide with each other every day—at the general store and in school corridors. Leadership can make learning a common cultural value.

### Financial Stringency

Rurality does not produce excess wealth. Basically, the land is the tax base in a rural district. Most citizens assume that school improvement depends on adapting what is already there. Leadership can focus on ways to make learning better.

### Inadequate Mass

Rurality prevents specialization. In town politics and education, community members adopt multiple roles depending on the needs of the moment. The town moderator may also be a parent, a teacher and a member of the volunteer fire department. Leadership can rely on teams already existing in a rural community.

### Personal Loneliness

Rurality puts distance between houses. People stop at the store—or the school—for daily news. When trouble occurs, communication is instantaneous. Good news takes longer, but purposeful leadership can involve a whole community in discussion of school improvement.

### Historical Stability

Rural schools represent the history of a community. In a rural school, individual members of the community have painted the walls, graded the playground, laid concrete for the front steps, and cooked for innumerable fundraisers—all as volunteers. A good leader adds to this historical drive new ideas about thinking, learning, and teaching.

—By John Clarke and Ken Hood

school community applies time to the task of school development in a coherent, planned—yet flexible—scheme.

## Momentum Toward Improvement

School improvement in Vermont has begun to generate a number of related effects, even when the basic models for improvement are as different as Piaget's developmentalism and Bloom's behaviorism. School-based master's degree programs:

1. create a common language among teachers and administrators;
2. move teaching and supervisory processes into alignment so that different school activities seek similar results;
3. create a common set of assumptions within an entire school community about what constitutes best practice for the professional community;
4. promote the development of policy that is consistent and coherent across grade levels, disciplines, and administrative units;
5. create a process for identifying common values and beliefs so that exemplary achievement can be recognized when it occurs.

In geography and climate, Vermont remains today as it was five years ago. Rugged mountains divide the state into separate sections. River valleys divide the sections into separate villages. On the roads that flank the rivers, buses carry children to village schools. Unlike five years ago, the University of Vermont and some of the schools have reached beyond their valleys for ways to support learning among their students. Off-campus master's degree programs and school improvement projects take advantage of rural isolation, creating local teams that commit time and talent to improving the achievement of local children. Simultaneously, school administrators, teachers, and university professors are discovering identity as members of a single profession. □

**Ken Hood** is assistant dean for outreach education and an instructor in administration, and **John Clarke** is associate director for educational design at the Instructional Development Center and an instructor in the area of curriculum. Both teach throughout Vermont for the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405.

school improvement plan. Courses have been designed to span a conventional semester, to spread out over two semesters, or to collapse into two weeks. Weekend and weekday retreats serve to hold a district program together. As districts have gained experience with using credit courses to manage school improvement, they have become skillful at defining needs more precisely and moving short-term, one-credit courses into the sequence. In the process they have involved both educational and content-area specialists from different colleges within the university.

Increasingly, university instructors and school teachers have formed teams to teach courses within the master's programs and to monitor project development. Teachers who have taken a course previously have become trainers for later cycles of the same course. Similarly, teachers who have taken a research course have become technical consultants to their own superintendents when the district was ready to fine-tune new data manage-

ment procedures. As the process of school-based training continues, the schools have reduced their dependence on the university for support and direction. As a school moves more deeply into school improvement, courses can be integrated with the actual school day and linked with existing staff development programs.

The nature of improvement projects has varied widely among participating districts. Some projects expand the elements of effective schools into leadership improvement, curriculum design, evaluation design, or climate improvement activities. Other projects are using an outcomes-based approach as an organizing framework. One district in central Vermont has run two cycles of a master's degree program focusing entirely on teaching from Piaget's developmental perspective. One school may start improvement by redesigning its drug and alcohol education program, while a neighboring school works to institute reality therapy as a discipline process. This collaboration ensures that a

Copyright © 1986 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.