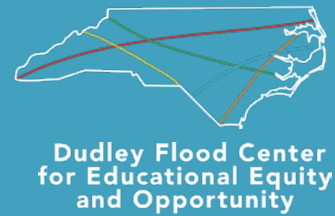


THE RURAL TEACHER LEADER NETWORK

An Analysis from North Carolina



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This policy brief centers on the impact of access to funding for equitable practices on teacher retention, classroom practices, and leadership opportunities for teachers. It also highlights the Rural Teacher Leader Network's (RTLN) efforts to promote teacher leadership by equipping them with knowledge about current funding structures and strategies to guide their own advocacy. Based on interviews and research literature, our analysis shows that RTLN's focus on providing networking, professional development, and learning opportunities enhances equitable practices in rural schools. As a result, students and public schools in rural areas benefit significantly from RTLN's efforts, as it empowers teachers to become instructional leaders and decision-makers.

The Rural Teacher Leader Network and the NC 1994 Leandro Case

The [1994 Leandro Case](#) established that a sound basic education is a fundamental right. The terms "sound" and "basic" refer to a stable and reliable education that provides essential knowledge and skills. This means that every student has the constitutional right to have competent and certified teachers who can identify the necessary resources to ensure that all students, including those at risk, have an equal opportunity to obtain a sound basic education as defined in the Leandro case (WestEd, 2019).

In response to the specific educational challenges faced by rural educators in Eastern North Carolina, the creation of the Rural Teacher Leader Network (RTLN) aims to offer professional development opportunities that enhance teachers' abilities to identify and implement equitable resources within their classrooms and school environments. The RTLN's impact is far-reaching, allowing more teachers to enhance their competence and effectiveness in their teaching practice. By participating in the network, educators gain valuable insights, strategies, and resources to apply in their classrooms. Through the RTLN, teachers exchange their skills and knowledge and contribute to the growth and improvement of education as a whole. The RTLN extends its positive influence by encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles, recruit other educators, and foster collaboration, creating a supportive educational environment. As a result, the overall quality of education in rural areas is elevated, benefiting teachers, students, and the broader community.

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RTLNL Goals in Action


The RTLNL participants' reflection on the impact of RTLNL created the space to highlight four of the six goals of RTLNL.



Teachers Opportunity to Lead

RTLNL Goal: To impact the knowledge and skills of other educators who are not in the network through professional learning and coaching. According to Berry, et al. (2010) increased opportunities to lead build on one another and translate into increased success for instructional leaders" (p. 1).

Participant response:

 *Been taking what I have learned from RTLNL and trying to apply it in the school, particularly around changing the culture of the school, collaborating, and influence colleagues on how to better serve students and drive instruction.*

-Participant#1




Recruitment and Retaining Teachers

RTLNL Goal: To build sustained capacity of a network of rural educators in the areas of culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed practices, global learning, policy, and teacher leadership.


Research: "Opportunities for teacher leadership are also critically important to recruiting and retaining the most effective and accomplished teachers" (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010, p. 5).

Participant Response:

 *'Got a new job' That is what it took for me to open my eyes for me to know I was not where I needed to be as an education. 'Went to a new county to spread my wings.'*

-Participant #3



 *I went to RTLNL to understand equity. I did not understand equity and did not have an equity lens.*

-Participant #3




Supportive Environment

RTLNL Goal: To create a cohesive, visible network of rural educators to increase support for educators in our rural districts.

Research: "Teacher leadership requires a supportive environment to maximize effectiveness." Nagle, C. E. (2022)p. 85

Participant Response:

 *RTLNL had them really think about their connection to their school and community. 'If you can learn how to be an advocate and matriculate your needs, that makes rooms for funding. Teachers need to be trained how to talk and pitch what they need, 'It is not a skill we have.'*

-Participant #2





Teachers Collaborate



Teacher leadership beyond the classroom walls facilitates the spread of effective teaching practices and breaks down barriers to effective teaching policies.

-(Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010, p.7)



Since RTLN, I am interested in working with more. It has increased at least 100% more.

-Participant #5



Equitable Funding Teachers and Funding Awareness

Interview questions and participants responses related to funding.

How has funding impacted teachers' ability to build capacity and strengthen their understanding of equitable student opportunities?

Research:

"Money matters for student achievement. A growing body of evidence shows that increased spending on education leads to better student outcomes. When states invest in their public schools and create more equitable school finance systems, student achievement levels rise, and the positive effects are even greater among low-income students. States, districts, and schools must spend their money wisely, targeting their funds toward evidence-based interventions," Garcia, C., & Mulholland, E. (2018)



The district lost teachers because of a lack of focus on equitable funding.

-Participant #4



Working in this district, I have learned how non-equitable public education is for rural counties.

-Participant # 4



Impact of Cohort

After

83%

OF PARTICIPANTS collaborate with teachers within their school building

Before

20%

OF PARTICIPANTS collaborated with teachers within their school building

After

17%

OF PARTICIPANTS collaborate with teachers outside the school building

Before

10%

OF PARTICIPANTS collaborated with teachers outside the school building

Summary

Education has undergone significant changes over the past three years, with the pandemic affecting all students, particularly those in rural or low-income areas. While the need for teachers to be culturally relevant and trauma-informed and to have knowledge of educational policies has increased, funding to support their growth, development, and retention has decreased. To ensure equitable funding for rural districts in North Carolina, it is essential to distribute funds fairly. Although the 1994 Leandro case mandated that every student in North Carolina receive a sound basic education, interviews conducted for this policy brief suggest that funding needs to be distributed equitably, especially in rural districts. Teachers are willing and capable of investing in their districts and effectively supporting student growth if given the opportunity and funding.

Recommendations

The Rural Teacher Network (RTLN) is a valuable opportunity for networking, professional development, and learning how to advocate for students. Based on the research presented in this policy brief and the participants' responses, two recommendations are proposed for districts to implement with little to no cost.

Recommendation 1: Transparency in how the budget is spent to support students and teachers should be a priority

For example, none of the participants were aware of funding set aside for equitable practices within their school building, and less than a majority knew of funding within the school district. Despite this, 83% reported being aware of or having applied for external funding. Research shows that teachers are 22% more likely to stay in their current classroom if they have a funded DonorsChoose project within that school year (DonorsChoose, 2019), which is why Participant #5 stated, "I chase the money down," often from external sources. However, the teachers in this study faced obstacles in receiving external funding. Participant #6 reported a reduction in public funding and restrictions on GoFundMe awards imposed by the district. Secondly, creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate outside of their school building is crucial.

Recommendation 2: It is vital for all stakeholders to collaborate and have a significant impact on student progress

As stated by Participant #5, "before the RTLN I was not interested in collaboration. I was actually creating an inequality environment by not willing to collaborate. Collaboration involves a shared creation of goals and joint work, where participants have both buy-in and an active voice. To make the best use of funding post-COVID, it is essential that all voices are heard and decisions are made to increase student performance and teacher retention.

References

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