

UC Berkeley

Recent Works

Title

Equity-Driven Leadership in Rural Education

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3q96k3g7>

Authors

Bae, Annie

Esboldt, Joy

Munzer, Alison

Publication Date

2024-06-01

Spring 2024

Prepared by

Annie Bae

Joy Esboldt

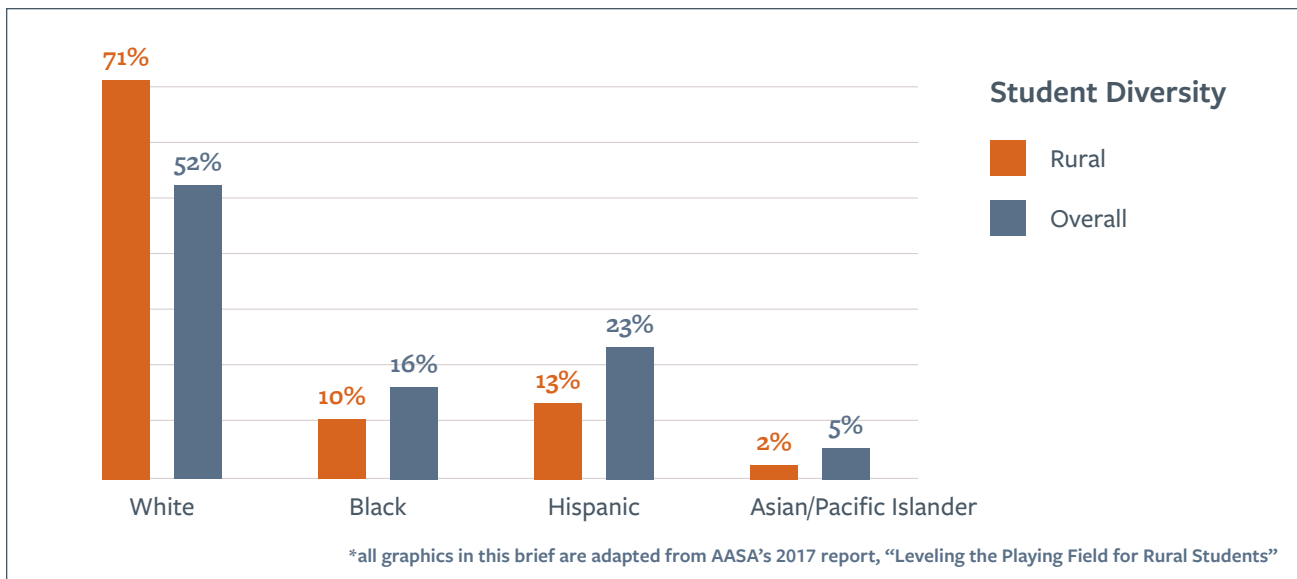
Dr. Alison Munzer

Equity-Driven Leadership in Rural Education

Introduction

In the United States, over 9.5 million students, or more than one in five students, attend rural schools.¹ Despite their large presence, rural education and schools are often neglected when it comes to policy-making and academic scholarship.² In a leadership context, the shortage of qualified principals and superintendents due to difficulties attracting candidates and frequent turnover remains a key issue.³ This is partly because rural leaders are often forced to wear many hats simultaneously without sufficient professional development and resources to aid them.⁴ Additionally, due to inaccurate narratives of rurality as homogenous and the widespread use of deficit perspectives such as parochialism or the lack of human capital,⁵ rural schools continue to face inequitable conditions.

While numerous scholars have found that there is no standard definition of *rural*,⁶ rurality shares some common challenges: (1) generational poverty; (2) geographic isolation; (3) single-industry economies or lack of local industry; and (4) relatively lower education attainment levels.⁷ However, it is important to note that in other aspects, rural places can diverge greatly from one another.⁸ Much of the literature on rural education focuses on socioeconomic and educational disparities such as funding and retaining quality school teachers.⁹ However, there is a more current, smaller body of literature that highlights the diversity of rural communities and its implications for equity-centered leadership,¹⁰ which will be the focus of this brief.

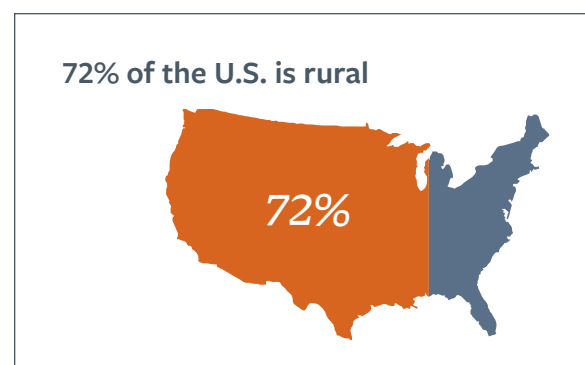


In recent years, there has been a call for rural research to examine the dual challenges of spatial equity (how challenges to equity connect to place) and educational equity along the intersections of race, socioeconomic status, and other social identities.¹¹ While rural America has often been depicted narrowly in popular media and press as consisting of poor, White communities, a recent report reveals that the rural student body as a whole is diverse, with certain districts housing large concentrations of minoritized students.¹² In these spaces, minoritized populations can face geographic segregation and further marginalization,¹³ leading to what McHenry-Sorber called “layers within layers of discrimination.”¹⁴ Thus, to address equity challenges, leaders need to go beyond comparing rural and non-rural educational disparities to also critically examine within-community marginalization.¹⁵

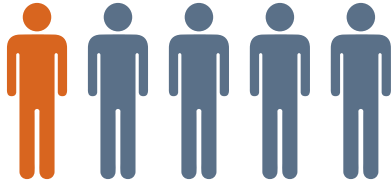
Equity Challenges in a Rural Context

Through a growing body of literature on the heterogeneity of rural schools, research on racial inequities within rural communities is becoming more prominent. While the strengths of rural communities include tight-knit social structures

and resulting social capital (the value and benefits derived from relationships within a community), these spaces are not always inclusive, leading to the marginalization of minoritized communities,¹⁶ something urban and suburban contexts struggle with as well. For example, Sutherland and colleagues highlighted the unique challenges faced by some rural regions, particularly in the Southern “Black Belt,” which encompasses hundreds of rural counties in states like Georgia, North Carolina, and Oklahoma.¹⁷ In these regions where there is a deep history of institutionalized racism, the legacy of racial oppression persists through educational systems and contemporary policies that result in educational opportunity gaps. Educational inequity is also



**Nearly 1 in 5 U.S. students
attend a rural school**



spatialized, stemming from a history of segregation, and often works in tandem with race and class to maintain a “separate but equal” school system for students of color.¹⁸ As a result, rural African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American students in segregated schools have significantly lower rates of academic achievement than their White counterparts.¹⁹ Moreover, over 42% of rural Native students, 36% of rural African American students, and 30% of rural Hispanic students attend high-poverty schools, as opposed to just 7% of rural White students.²⁰ Sutherland and colleagues explained that while the concept of a tight-knit community and bonding social capital function as a strength of rurality, they can simultaneously reproduce inequities for community outsiders or marginalized groups, leading to “opportunity hoarding” for insiders.²¹ As rural communities become more diverse, superintendents may encounter challenges in adapting due to limited knowledge, obstacles in establishing effective alliances, resistance to diversity and equity efforts, and the slow pace of cultural change, hindering effective leadership practices toward greater inclusivity.²² Addressing the needs of diverse communities is challenging in any educational context. Yet, it is important to prepare students to talk across differences and foster respect for one another in an increasingly polarized society.²³ As such, the literature suggests that building mutual

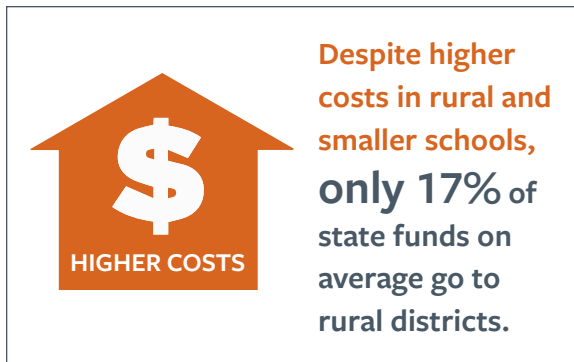
respect and trust with all stakeholders²⁴ and making the school’s vision central while taking into account the cultural values in rural communities can aid in bringing positive change.²⁵

Rural Leadership Challenges

One major characteristic of rural leadership is the highly public role stemming from the tight-knit nature of rural communities. As a result, school leaders are often met with high expectations or heightened scrutiny, which can have both advantages and disadvantages when examined in an equity context.²⁶ As an integral part of the community at large, rural superintendents can effectively build and sustain collaborative relationships with community organizations that aim to push for more equitable practices.²⁷ At the same time, being entrenched in local community power structures can force leaders to place greater attention on the needs of locals rather than those of perceived outsiders, who mainly consist of racial minorities.²⁸ Further, the influx of newcomers to a rural community can create new or exacerbate existing tensions regarding the practice and purpose of rural schools.²⁹ In a broader sense, the literature suggests that effective rural school leaders understand how to balance these types of competing priorities³⁰ and can resolve local-level conflict that may stem from national political narratives that do not always align with the community’s values and needs.³¹



**53% of school districts
in the U.S. are rural**



Community Partnerships and Critical Place-Conscious Leadership

To effectively address deep-rooted equity issues, a large body of literature discusses the need for rural school leaders to capitalize on the strengths of rural communities—a strong sense of home, family, and community.³² Rural communities are typically characterized by tight-knit relational networks and intergenerational closures that strengthen community norms, values, and attitudes.³³ As such, school–community partnerships can play a significant role in school reform and community development,³⁴ with principals and superintendents acting as agents of change.³⁵ Thus, it remains crucial for rural education leaders to foster dialogue and collaboration grounded in mutual trust and relationships that empower individuals to address the community’s needs collectively. Further, because rural schools often bring students and families from several towns together, they can be an important tool to drive racial integration in places where town-to-town segregation persists.³⁶ However, challenges such as enduring poverty and racism in rural communities exceed the capacity of schools to address independently. Addressing longstanding structural inequities requires the formal collaboration of community organizations and the informal support of individuals and families.³⁷

One specific leadership theory that relies on the strengths of rural schools is Gruenewald’s foundational work on place-conscious leadership. In response to one-size-fits-all policy mandates that often overlook rural education, place-conscious leadership theory emphasizes cultural and ecological contexts to encourage contextually responsive leadership in rural communities.³⁸ Critical place-conscious leadership, a revisionist model of place-conscious leadership, emphasizes social and ecological justice,³⁹ inextricably linking schools and local communities to address external forces that may threaten the wellbeing of the community.⁴⁰ This form of leadership recognizes that each school and community’s ability to thrive depends upon the other. As critical leaders of place, rural superintendents collaborate with staff and the community to pose key questions about how certain policies, curricula, or school structures reproduce power dynamics.⁴¹ However, several scholars have problematized prior conceptualizations of critical place-conscious leadership, contending that they focus primarily on critiquing systems that marginalize the rural community as a whole rather than the social inequities within rural communities.⁴² Further, these scholars have asserted that critical place-conscious leadership needs to acknowledge the heterogeneity within rural communities and undergo a critical examination of issues regarding race, gender, and class.⁴³ While critical place-conscious leadership remains an essential framework for rural superintendents, empirical research on how it can be used in practice to develop successful equity-based practices has been limited.⁴⁴ Overall, a more nuanced understanding of rural education and its diverse landscape with further attention on not only inequities between rural and non-rural schools but also intra-community marginalization is necessary to foster inclusivity in rural communities

and schools. In the following section, we offer questions to guide reflection on the contents of this brief and incorporation into practice.

Reflection Questions (adapted from the Equity in Student-Centered Learning Design Guide⁴⁵):

- ▶ What is your personal definition of equity in education? What is your role in ensuring equity is present in your work?
- ▶ Who can support you and hold you accountable?
- ▶ Do you have healthy ways of addressing conflict?
- ▶ Are there any language or cultural differences that are creating challenges for positive relationships at your school? What resources do you already have on staff or within the community to bridge this challenge?
- ▶ How will your team know that you are faithfully applying an equity lens to build and foster relationships with and among various stakeholders?
- ▶ If your school does not have teachers from the same ethnic communities as your students, how do you provide relationship opportunities for students within their own communities?
- ▶ How might community leaders help meet the cultural foundational needs of students? Who can you partner with to meet these needs?

Thank you to our reviewers: Dr. Erin McHenry-Sorber, Dr. Jessica Murphy, and Rindy DeVoll, Executive Director of the CA Rural Ed Network. Any remaining shortcomings are our own.

Notes

1. Showalter et al., 2023

2. Schafft, 2016

3. Lamkin, 2006; Pendola & Fuller, 2021; Wood et al., 2013

4. Ashton & Duncan, 2013; Lamkin, 2006; Rey, 2014

5. Azano & Biddle, 2019

6. Bauch, 2000; Budge, 2006; Herzog and Pittman, 1995; Preston et al., 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017

7. McHenry-Sorber, 2021

8. McHenry-Sorber, 2021

9. Goodpaster et al., 2018; Hare, 1991; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Murphy & Angelski, 1997; O'Hare, 2009

10. Lichter, 2012; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020; Nespor, 2008; Showalter et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2023; Tieken, 2017; Tomlinson, 2020

11. Hartman et al., 2022

12. Showalter et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2020

13. Lichter, 2012

14. McHenry-Sorber, 2020, as cited in Tomlinson, 2020, p. 3

15. McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018

16. Bauch, 2000

17. Sutherland et al., 2022

18. Tieken, 2017

19. Irvin et al., 2016; Nganga et al., 2021; Tieken, 2017

20. Lavalley, 2018

21. Sutherland et al., 2022

22. McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018

23. 21st Century California School Leadership Academy, 2023

24. Wiecek & Manard, 2018

25. Ashton & Duncan, 2013

26. Forner et al., 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Preston et al., 2013;

27. McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020

28. McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017

29. Brennan & Cooper, 2008

30. Preston & Barnes, 2017

31. Rey, 2014

32. Bauch, 2000; Harmon & Schafft, 2018; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020; Tieken, 2017

33. Bauch, 2000

34. Bauch, 2000; Harmon & Schafft, 2018; Schafft, 2016

35. Preston & Barnes, 2017; Zuckerman, 2020

36. Tieken, 2017

37. McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020

38. Gruenewald, 2003

39. Budge, 2010; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018

40. Budge, 2006; Budge, 2010

41. Rey, 2014

42. McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Nespor, 2008

43. Nespor, 2008

44. Sutherland et al., 2023

45. Education Evolving, 2022

References:

- 21st Century California School Leadership Academy. (2023). Educating for a diverse democracy: Leading schools and districts in a time of political conflict. UC Berkeley. <https://21cslcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/webinar-highlights-educating-diverse-democracy>
- AASA. (2017). Leveling the playing field for rural students. <https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/leveling-the-playing-field-for-rural-students>
- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2013). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *The Rural Educator*, 34(1). <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i1.405>
- Azano, A. P., & Biddle, C. (2019). Disrupting dichotomous traps and rethinking problem formation for rural education. *The Rural Educator*, 40(2), 4–11. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.845>
- Bauch, P. A. (2000). *School–Community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal and a sense of place*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED470509>
- Brennan, K. M., & Cooper, C. A. (2008). Rural mountain natives, immigrants, and the cultural divide. *The Social Science Journal*, 45(2), 279–295. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sosscij.2008.03.006>
- Budge, K. (2006). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13). <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/21-13.pdf>
- Budge, K. (2010). Why shouldn't rural kids have it all? Place-conscious leadership in an era of extralocal reform policy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v18n1.2010>
- Education Evolving. (2022). *Equity in student-centered learning design*. <https://www.educationevolving.org/files/Equity-in-SCL-Design.pdf>
- Forner, M., Bierlein-Palmer, L., & Reeves, P. (2012). Leadership practices of effective rural superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano's leadership correlates. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 27(8). <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/27-8.pdf>
- Furman, G. C., & Gruenewald, D. A. (2004). Expanding the landscape of social justice: A critical ecological analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 47–76. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013161X03259142>
- Goodpaster, K. P. S., Adedokun, O. A., & Weaver, G. C. (2012). Teachers' perceptions of rural STEM teaching: Implications for rural teacher retention. *Rural Educator*, 33(3), 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v33i3.408>
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032004003>
- Hare, D. (1991). Identifying, recruiting, selecting, inducting, and supervising rural teachers. In *Rural Education* (1991). Routledge.
- Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. A. (2018). Rural school leadership for collaborative community development. *The Rural Educator*, 30(3), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i3.443>
- Hartman, S. L., Roberts, J. K., Schmitt-Wilson, S., McHenry-Sorber, E., Buffington, P., & Biddle, C. (2022). National Rural Education Association research agenda–2022–2027: A closer look at the research priorities. *The Rural Educator*, 43(3), 59–66. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1362160.pdf>
- Herzog, M. J. R., & Pittman, R. B. (1995, October 1). Home, family, and community: Ingredients in the rural education equation. *Phi Delta Kappan*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Home%2C-Family%2C-and-Community%3A-Ingredients-in-the-Herzog-Pittman/53054fc956f69e090ef8aa59c9112c8b484187b0>
- Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Reed, K. S., & Farmer, T. W. (2016). School characteristics and experiences of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American youth in rural communities: Relation to educational aspirations. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(2), 176–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151739>
- Lamkin, M. (2006). Challenges and changes faced by rural superintendents. *The Rural Educator*, 28(1), 17–25. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v28i1.486>
- Lavalley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity, and isolation*. Center for Public Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED608842>
- Lichter, D. T. (2012). Immigration and the new racial diversity in rural America. *Rural Sociology*, 77(1), 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x>
- McHenry-Sorber, E. (2021). Strong rural communities. In C. Howley & S. Redding (Eds.), *Cultivating rural education: A people-focused approach for states*. Information Age Publishing.
- McHenry-Sorber, E., & Budge, K. (2018). Revisiting the rural superintendency: Rethinking guiding theories for contemporary practice. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 33(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.18113/P8JRRE3303>
- McHenry-Sorber, E., & Provinzano, K. (2017). Confronting rapid change: Exploring the practices of educational leaders in a rural boomtown. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(4), 602–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1232833>
- McHenry-Sorber, E., & Sutherland, D. H. (2020). Metaphors of place-conscious leadership in the multidistrict superintendency: Negotiating tensions of place-consciousness and district-wide goal attainment. *The Journal of School Leadership*, 30(2), 105–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619852693>
- Murphy, P. J., & Angelski, K. (1997). Rural teacher mobility: A report from British Columbia. *Rural Educator*, 18(2), 5–11. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ539966>
- Nespor, J. (2008). Education and place: A review essay. *Educational Theory*, 58(4), 475–489. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00301.x>
- Nganga, L., Kamutu, J., Scull, R. W., & Han, K. T. (2021). High school students of color in the U.S. speak about their educational experiences: Schooling, culture and pedagogy. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 12(3), 1–27. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1318794.pdf>
- O'Hare, W. P. (2009). The forgotten fifth: Child poverty in rural America. *The Carsey School of Public Policy at the Scholars' Repository*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.76>
- Pendola, A., & Fuller, E. J. (2022). Homeward bound? Rural principal hiring, transfer, and turnover patterns in Texas. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 58(1), 43–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X211045920>
- Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K. E. R. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *The Rural Educator*. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.231>

Preston, J. P., Jakubiec, B. A. E., & Kooymans, R. (2018). Common challenges faced by rural principals: A review of the literature. *The Rural Educator*, 35(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v35i1.355>

Rey, J. C. (2014). The rural superintendency and the need for a critical leadership of place. *The Journal of School Leadership*, 24(3), 539–536. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461402400305>

Schafft, K. A. (2016). Rural education as rural development: Understanding the rural school–community well-being linkage in a 21st-century policy context. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(2), 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151734>

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580>

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2023). Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity: A discussion with the research team. *The Rural Educator*, 44(4), 69–71.

Sutherland, D. H., McHenry-Sorber, E., & Willingham, J. N. (2022). Just Southern: Navigating the social construction of a rural community in the press for educational equity. *The Rural Educator*, 43(1), 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v43i1.1212>

Sutherland, D. H., McHenry-Sorber, E., & Willingham, J. N. (2023). Leading rural districts: Research synthesis of rural educational leaders. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98(4), 414–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2023.2238519>

Tieken, M. C. (2017). The spatialization of racial inequity and educational opportunity: Rethinking the rural/urban divide. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(3), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2017.1324662>

Tomlinson, H. B. (2020). Gaining ground on equity for rural schools and communities. Rural equity series. Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED627824>

Wiezorek, D., & Manard, C. (2018). Instructional leadership challenges and practices of novice principals in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 34(2), 1–21. https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/34-2_0.pdf

Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. M. (2018). If we get you, how can we keep you? Problems with recruiting and retaining rural administrators. *The Rural Educator*, 34(2). <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.399>

Zuckerman, S. J. (2020). The role of rural school leaders in a school–community partnership. *Theory and Practice in Rural Education*, 10(1), 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2020.v10n1p73-91>

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

Follow us



@21CSLA #21CSLA #LeadingForEquity

Visit the 21CSLA website: 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu

Sign up for our mailing list: 21csla.tiny.us/news-signup

