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Building a Magnet School Network in Rural Communities

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Building a Magnet School Network in Rural Communities

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Introduction

Maintaining rural community economic viability, schools, and retaining youth are concerns for many rural areas. The current population shift from rural to urban areas is compounding the issue. One means of keeping young people and adults in rural communities and encouraging people to move from urban to rural communities is to provide high quality, relevant, affordable educational programs on demand. The Mead Agricultural Sciences Magnet School, the first rural magnet school, was created to fill such a void. Now in its third year of operation, the rural agricultural sciences magnet school concept is being incorporated into three other communities.

The purpose of building a rural community magnet school network is to increase the number of young adults living, employed, and investing in rural areas. The objectives are to: (1) incorporate the magnet school model of the Mead Agricultural Sciences Magnet High School into three other communities; (2) design new curricula and redesign existing curricula for distance delivery and compatibility with the four schools and communities; and (3) assess the success of the network for adaptation into other rural communities interested in revitalization.

Program Development

The Mead Agricultural Sciences Magnet School has been in operation since the 1999-2000 academic year. Prior to its inception, the school board and administration were faced with cutting programs and teachers due to declining student enrollment, a state mandated tax lid on school spending, and falling agricultural commodity prices. People in the community were concerned about the survival of their small school. Teachers were concerned about losing their jobs. Parents were concerned about sending their children to schools that may not have the same high academic standards. Schools are the heart of many rural communities, and when their existence is threatened, community members tend to rally around ideas that will keep the doors open.

Several saw an opportunity to work collaboratively with the University's Agriculture Research and Development Center (ARDC) to help "keep students in Nebraska" and involved in the agricultural industry. An administrator explained, "the main goal in terms of the district was to provide an agricultural education program for our students that would prepare them to go into the immediate agriculture industry. (A) Secondary goal was to keep the school open." (Moody & Bell, 2001).

The school district and ARDC were granted seed money from Nebraska Network 21 to study the feasibility of creating an agricultural magnet school (NN21 News, 1998). Administrators, board members, teachers and students visited existing agricultural magnet schools and non-traditional agricultural education programs as well as attended national conferences on educational reform efforts.

During the 1998-99 school year, a student interest inventory was conducted. From this interest inventory, four career pathways were identified: agricultural technology, plant science, agribusiness, and food science. Animal science was identified as another pathway.

Resources

Several key factors in this transformation were: succinct values, broad involvement, collaboration, communication, leadership, resource availability, and a shared vision and subsequent action planning and implementation. Mead had the commitment from the ARDC, school board, and community members and businesses. Also they partnered with university faculty in planning and creating curriculum and programs. External funding from NN21 funded a biotechnology curriculum project, the catalyst for discussion and partnering for a magnet school. NN21 seed money was used to study the feasibility of implementing a magnet school into an existing educational structure. Pioneer Hybrids, and community and small businesses have funded supplies and provided facility updates. A W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant has been instrumental in extending the agricultural sciences magnet network to three additional schools.

Lessons Learned

1. Sense of urgency. To prompt change, a sense of urgency must be created (Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1999). In this case, the urgency will prompt change if attached to core values.
2. Community Vision. A community vision requires leadership that empowers those affected to have input in the decisions creating the ultimate vision (Yukl, 1998).
3. Communication. Constant communication articulating the vision of change removes doubts that may surface as the organization proceeds.
4. Program planning and evaluation. Implementing program planning and evaluation allows the school to document its effectiveness and success stories.

References

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