Distance Education in Rural Schools:
Patterns of Use and Barriers to Use, A Survey of School Administrators

National Research Center on Rural Education Support
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Introduction

It is well documented that rural schools experience difficulty attracting and retaining qualified and experienced teachers. Distance education, including the use of Internet and web-based materials, interactive television, computer conferencing, and multimedia modules, has been suggested as a partial solution to address this and other problems that rural schools face. Yet little is known about the extent to which distance education is being utilized by rural schools, the curriculum areas impacted, the perceived needs for distance education, their satisfaction with distance to education, and the barriers to distance education. To address this research gap, researchers at the University of North Carolina and the Pennsylvania State University conducted a national telephone survey, called the Rural Distance Education Survey (RDES), of rural schools in 2005. Approximately 400 small and low income rural districts in the United States were randomly selected for participation and their administrators were interviewed to collect a wide range of information about distance education in order to better understand the use of, barriers to, and satisfaction with distance education in rural schools.

Do Rural Schools Need Distance Education?

RDES revealed that approximately 81% of school administrators reported that they needed distance education to provide the advanced or enrichment courses that students wanted. Only about 19% indicated that they did not need distance education for this purpose.

Do Rural Schools Use Distance Education?

RDES also revealed that 85% of the surveyed rural districts had used distance education at some time. Furthermore, approximately 70% indicated that their district was currently using distance learning; approximately 16% had previously used distance education but were not currently doing so. Only 15% indicated that they had never used distance education. During the survey, school administrators in districts that were currently using or had previously used distance education were asked to estimate the percent of students in their district that enrolled in and completed distance education courses. On average, approximately 12% of students were reported to have taken distance education courses, while the majority of students who enrolled in distance education courses completed them (89%).

Common Uses – What Subject Areas are Most Frequently Used in Distance Education?

RDES revealed that the most frequently taken distance education courses were in the following subject areas:

1. Foreign Language
2. Algebra
3. Psychology or Sociology
4. Language/ Composition
5. U.S. History

Satisfaction with Distance Education

RDES asked administrators to indicate how satisfied they were with distance education courses used by their district on a scale that included very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. Overall, a majority of districts were either very satisfied (47.3%) or somewhat satisfied (44.8%) with their use of distance education.

Why Do Rural Schools Stop Using Distance Education?

RDES asked those districts, which indicated they had previously used distance education but were not currently using it, to identify the main reasons they stopped. The most frequently cited reason districts reported for not continuing to use distance education was lack of student interest and participation (40.3%). The second most frequently noted reason was time or scheduling issues (16.1%), followed by lack of support personnel (11.3%).

What Barriers Do Rural Schools Have to Use Distance Education?

RDES asked school administrators which factors limited their use of distance education courses. Some of the most frequently mentioned barriers were related to district level or policy issues and included that distance education courses were not needed to meet curriculum requirements (67.7%) and were not a district priority (53.2%). Funding was also reported as being a major barrier across districts (63.7%). The next group of barriers involved the logistics of unitizing distance education courses. A majority of districts indicated that they had experienced scheduling difficulties (58.7%). Approximately 50% of districts indicated lack of personnel as another major barrier. In particular, rural schools with a high proportion of poor and African American students perceived personnel as a more serious barrier. In the meantime, availability or knowledge of how to obtain distance education courses were not an issue for most districts; only 31% reported having difficulty finding the distance education courses they needed. In addition, issues with technology itself were least frequently reported as being a barrier.
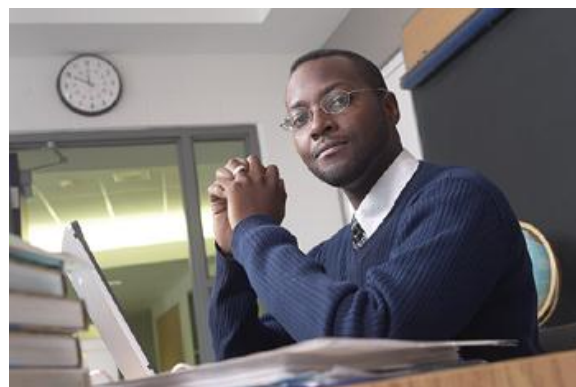
Success for Distance Education in Rural Schools: Role of Facilitators

Research suggests that although student learning in distance education is at least equal to that in traditional classes if not better, distance education courses have substantially lower rates of course completion. Policy implications are clear: increasing completion rates of distance education courses, but how? The research team at the University of North Carolina and Pennsylvania State University addressed this issue by developing the Facilitator Preparation Program to train school-based adults (i.e., facilitators) to support rural students taking advanced online courses. They further assessed the impact of training facilitators in student retention in distance educational courses by conducting a cluster-randomized control trial with more than 600 students in 93 rural high schools. They found that having facilitators in the room with secondary school students as they work on distance education courses had a positive impact on the students' persistence in these courses and their completion of the courses.

Despite the success of distance education for student learning some rural schools stop using it. Most common reasons for discontinuing distance education programming – lack of interest, scheduling problems, and lack of support staff

Implications

✓ Due to the need for distance education among rural schools as well as district-level barriers (e.g., lack of sufficient funding), policymakers should promote policies and dispersion of funds to support the use of distance education in small and low-income rural districts.

✓ Given that district characteristics (e.g., poverty, percent of minority students) were related to personnel barriers, policymakers should address specific personnel issues in particular types of rural schools.

✓ Policymakers may help increase rural districts' effective use of distance education to provide students advanced courses by providing funds to support the training and role of school-based facilitators.

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Further Reading

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