

Rural Indiana

Developing the Next Generation of Leaders

By **Christine Prior**



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High school principals from rural school districts across Indiana are concerned with population declines and the subsequent availability of young people to assume leadership roles to direct and support community initiatives in coming years.

School administrators voiced their opinions in a 2012 spring survey conducted by Indiana State University's Rural-Urban Entrepreneurship Development Institute (RUEDI). High school principals in 181 school districts in the 74 rural counties across the state were asked to rate their concern with maintaining population to assure community viability, development of new businesses and industries, and finding people to take leadership roles within the communities. Respondents ranked all three of the attitudinal questions from "very important" to "critical concern."

Fifty-three percent of respondents reported that their school has experienced a decline in enrollment during the past 10 years. Survey data correspond to census data that 52% of Indiana's rural counties have lost population during the last two decades. Collectively, RUEDI's Data Center reports that during the past decade Indiana's rural counties have lost 3% of their population age 19 and below and 4% of those between 20 and 34 years old.

The survey further noted a correlation between administrators' perception of the importance of identifying future leaders with two other factors: the number of leadership/entrepreneurship programs available at the school and the proportion of students going on to postsecondary education.

Steven Pontius, professor of geography and RUEDI director, states, "The higher administrators' perception, the greater number of programs available; the greater number of programs available, the higher the educational aspirations of students. This often creates a Catch-22 where the more opportunities the school offers to its students, the more opportunities they seek – often in the urban centers outside of Indiana. To combat the exodus of the rural youth, school districts need to involve their local civic and business leadership within programs to highlight rural opportunities and to engage prospective leaders of tomorrow with the leaders of today.

"Solutions to combating issues now and in the future will greatly depend on students' awareness of career opportunities and their attitude toward the communities in which they live," Pontius continues.

RUEDI will conduct a second survey for

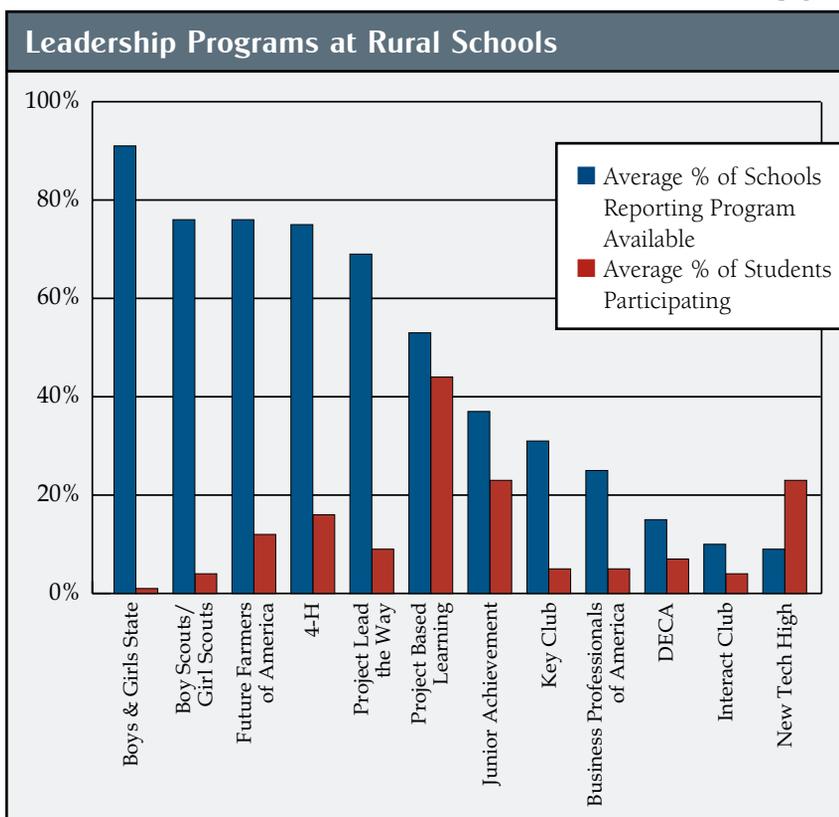
students. It will include questions about plans after graduation, the students' views of their community and whether it has the career and personal satisfaction amenities to attract them back home.

On average, survey respondents reported that 88% of their freshmen graduate and 58% of their graduates continue on to postsecondary education.

Approximately 90% of respondents indicated that at least one program was available to promote leadership/entrepreneurship among students. The most widely available programs identified – Boys & Girls State, Boy/Girl Scouts, Future Farmers of America and 4-H – tend to be extracurricular activities and only impact small percentages of the student body. Programs with the greatest levels of student involvement are incorporated into curricula. They include: project-based learning, Junior Achievement and New Tech High.

In addition to these specific programs, other examples of leadership training at rural schools include economics classes that allow students to create their own business, leadership training courses, professional internships, business development courses and agricultural fundamental courses.

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Outside of explicit “leadership-focused” training programs, an average of 8.7 athletic teams and academic clubs offer opportunities for 33% of students to develop skills often associated with leadership and entrepreneurship. Athletics offer an average of 16 teams engaging 27% of males and 23% of females.

While more than half of the schools responding to the survey claimed an interest in offering “other” leadership/entrepreneurship opportunities to their students, principals noted the lack of financial resources and awareness of existing programs, and staff availability or interest as primary barriers.

Potential new programs of interest included: job shadowing, leadership session (15-20 minutes daily), partnerships with businesses and military (ROTC) and offering associate’s degrees in entrepreneurship/business in high school.

RUEDI intends to use information gathered from the survey to assist schools in minimizing the barriers to program implementation by:

(1) providing a clearinghouse of current innovative programs; (2) developing high quality interdisciplinary entrepreneurial education materials for teachers to use in K-12 education; and (3) creating a network of teacher and student mentors to promote entrepreneurship education and identify funding resources for the implementation of programs.

INFORMATION LINK

Author: Christine Prior is a consultant with the Rural-Urban Entrepreneurship Development Institute at Indiana State University. Learn more at www.unboundedpossibilities.com/ruedi