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Dynamic Policy Solutions for Rural EL Educators

**Elizabeth Thorne Wallington
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Many rural communities have seen population shifts with burgeoning communities of linguistic, racial, and economic diversity expanding into traditionally homogenous rural communities (e.g. Brenner, 2016; Sharp & Lee, 2017). These shifts can occur rapidly, as a result of regional economic, social, or political forces and are particularly impactful on local educational community resources (Hansen-Thomas, et al., 2016). This policy brief outlines a systemic approach to professional development needs for educators in rural communities who support students from diverse backgrounds. These practices provide the support needed to meet emerging student needs and strengthen educators' self-efficacy (Flores, et al., 2015; O'Neal, et al., 2008).

Literature Review

Research in public health, public policy, and education have demonstrated differential and disparate impacts of federal and state policies on rural populations as compared to urban populations (e.g. McFarland, 2018; Jones, et al., 2009). Examining the impacts of state education policy on rural school districts is particularly impactful given current demographic shifts in rural school districts across the U.S. (Kreck, 2014). Previous research on rural education has found statistically significant differences on achievement outcome measures for multiple subgroups, including English learners (ELs; Johnson, et al., 2014). As rural districts encounter emerging enrollments from culturally and linguistically diverse subgroups, notable gaps in EL services across rural districts have been seen (Kreck, 2014) and funding formulae are insufficient to meet EL needs (Jimenez-Castellanos & Topper, 2012). Because funding formulae are typically based on group size and rural EL populations can be quite small, districts with a low incidence of ELs face additional challenges (Hill & Flynn, 2004). Funding and policy constraints, which are often closely connected, can lead to differences in structural marginalization of students between urban and rural schools (Liggett, 2010). While there are a range of professional development practices that have been identified to support ELs in rural schools (e.g. Donnelly & Flynn, 2004; Hamann & Reeves, 2013;

Haneda & Wells, 2012; Kreck, 2014), schools with low EL population enrollment (e.g. "low incidence") require a nuanced approach to training educators in these practices (Christianson, 2016).

Teacher preparation has a significant impact on student achievement outcomes (e.g. López, et al., 2013), but there are no federally-established teacher education standards for any population or population subgroup. Instead, states establish professional certification requirements to earn a teaching license for that state. Because states have a variety of student populations and needs, policies for teacher licensure established at the state level can have differing and unintended impacts at the local district level. For instance, fewer first year teachers in rural districts completed *any* coursework on ELs, compared to first year teachers in urban districts (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Rigorous certification requirements, seen as a catalyst to improving student achievement, can prove burdensome for districts that struggle to fill vacancies or cannot fund additional certifications for their current teachers. As a response to teacher shortages, some states have sought to reduce barriers to certification, such as by eliminating all required coursework and only requiring teachers to pass a specified standardized test. While reduced certification requirements help fill open positions (Menken & Antunez, 2001), this approach is correlated with lower EL achievement (Johnson & Thorne-Wallington, 2019) the impacts of which are also moderated by place (Thorne-Wallington & Johnson, 2021). Recent research also indicates that these impacts may be particularly problematic for low-incidence rural EL populations (Thorne-Wallington & Johnson, 2022).

Proposed Policy Framework

To address the needs of low-incidence EL populations in rural districts, we suggest using a logic model framework (Figure 1) to create a sustainable system of professional development for rural districts undergoing demographic shifts. The model in Figure 1 outlines a multi-faceted approach to meeting rural teacher professional development needs at the local level. The model highlights the importance of accounting for and adapting to the diversity that is specific to local school and district demographics

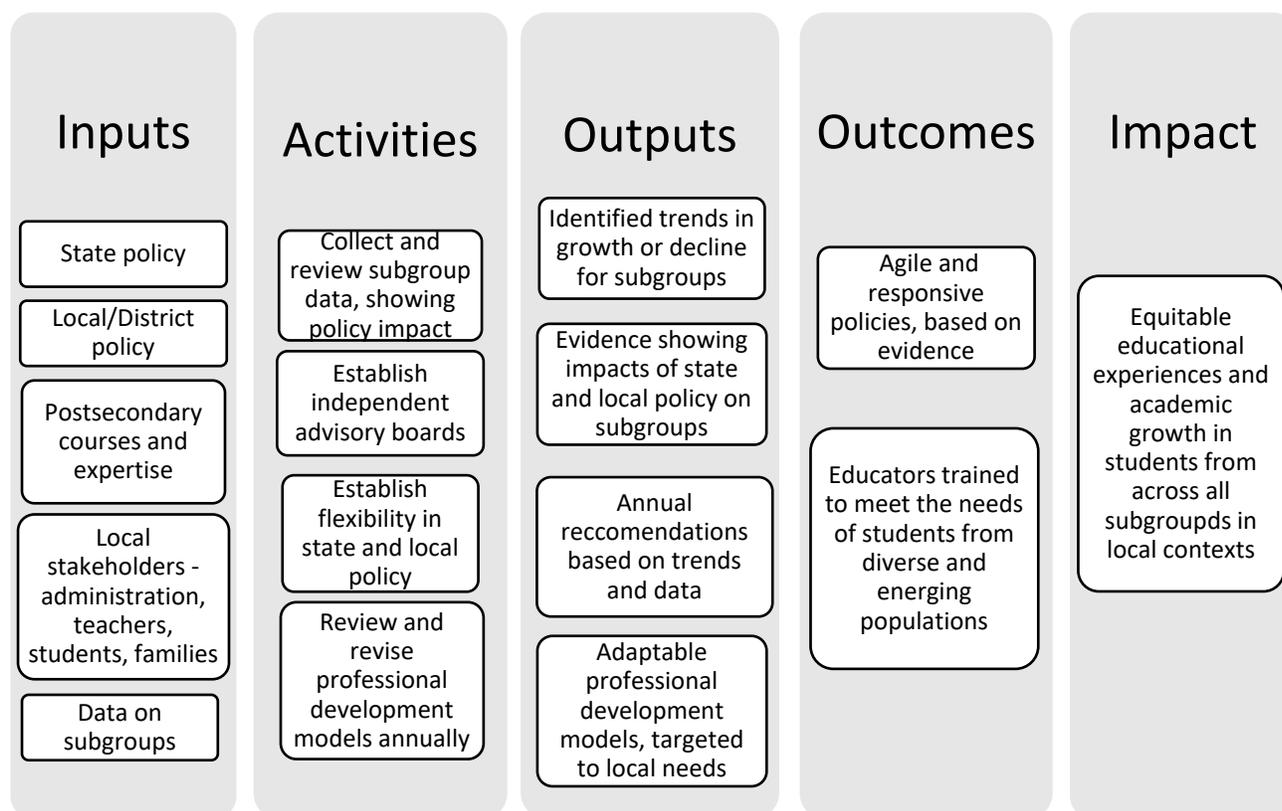


Figure 1. Logic Model for Promising Practices in Addressing Emerging Rural Subgroups

context, geography, and school composition factors. We suggest creating a policy that makes use of existing postsecondary institutions to support professional development and certification needs of rural teachers and districts with emerging populations of English learners. Identifying consistent inputs, activities, and outputs needed, results in a dynamic system that will be flexible enough to meet the needs of emerging and continuously shifting rural populations.

Inputs and activities. Recent research has demonstrated the importance of accounting for differences in local context when determining the impacts of state education policy on EL achievement (Thorne-Wallington & Johnson, 2022). Data analysis techniques that examine broad state or national population outcomes do not account for nuances in local demographics and rural district needs because low-incidence populations may have insufficient *n* to be captured at all data levels. Our policy approach addresses the needs of emerging populations by including local stakeholders with distinct contributions and across multiple levels when considering policy frameworks.

The disparate impacts of certification requirements based on school context variables also

support the need for a multi-tiered and dynamic approach to EL educator training (Johnson & Thorne-Wallington, 2019). By providing rural districts with local control over how to support educators' immediate professional development needs, local stakeholders will have the opportunity to address shifting student needs, particularly for emerging and low-incidence populations. Local control models also avoid low-threshold approaches like alternative test-only certification routes, which are correlated with lower achievement scores across districts because they neglect the specific skills demonstrated to support EL students and educators (Johnson and Thorne-Wallington, 2019). The policy framework suggested here would prevent such reactionary policies by providing a flexible and nuanced approach, allowing for both local control and state guidance to meet each districts' needs.

Outputs

Figure 2 shows rural population by county with dots representing the number of limited English proficiency households. While many of the largest numbers of both rural population and limited English

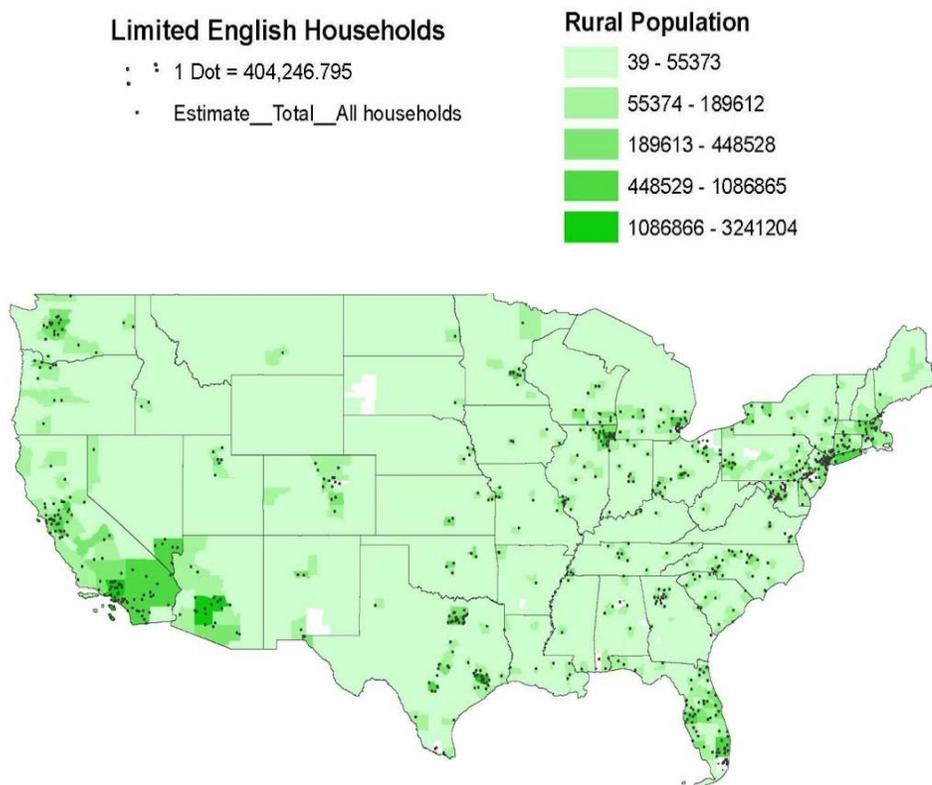


Figure 2. Rural population and Limited English Proficiency Households

households are near urban areas, some are in traditionally rural areas, demonstrating that the challenges of meeting EL needs are not limited to specific geographies

Recommendations

Recent research (Thorne Wallington & Johnson, 2022) has demonstrated a high degree of variability in the demographics of school districts. This variation in populations is also correlated with different impacts in efficacy of state-level teacher certification policies. This correlation indicates that state-level teacher certification policies may not be sufficient to meet the needs of rural educators serving low-incidence EL populations. Based on our findings (Thorne-Wallington & Johnson, 2022), we suggest adopting the following policy framework, wherein a variety of stakeholders work within a dynamic system to meet the needs of all students (Figure 3).

Current teacher licensure requirements are rigid and established at the state level. In our model, states would create a policy framework that would allow for dynamic professional development experiences that are also connected to certification. One element

of this would be to allow for leveled certification options. We recommend the implementation of a system that creates tiered and stackable certifications allowing educators to work toward full certification. These ‘microcredentials’ could be implemented either within districts and/or at the postsecondary level, utilizing partnerships with local universities. This combined approach will allow teachers to gain immediate access to essential skills and knowledge of high-impact practices, while creating a pathway for additional certifications aligned with local needs. Microcredentials validate and certify a specified set of skills without needing a full, time-intensive degree (Acree, L, 2016). These microcredentials can build toward a full degree or certification (Hunt, et al., 2019). This is particularly important for rural settings whose access to professional development and funding may be limited. Participants can gradually build their knowledge and understanding in response to local student population needs, limiting financial and time-based obstacles.

The implementation of this policy framework would create new opportunities for strategic, rather than responsive, teacher certification policies. First,

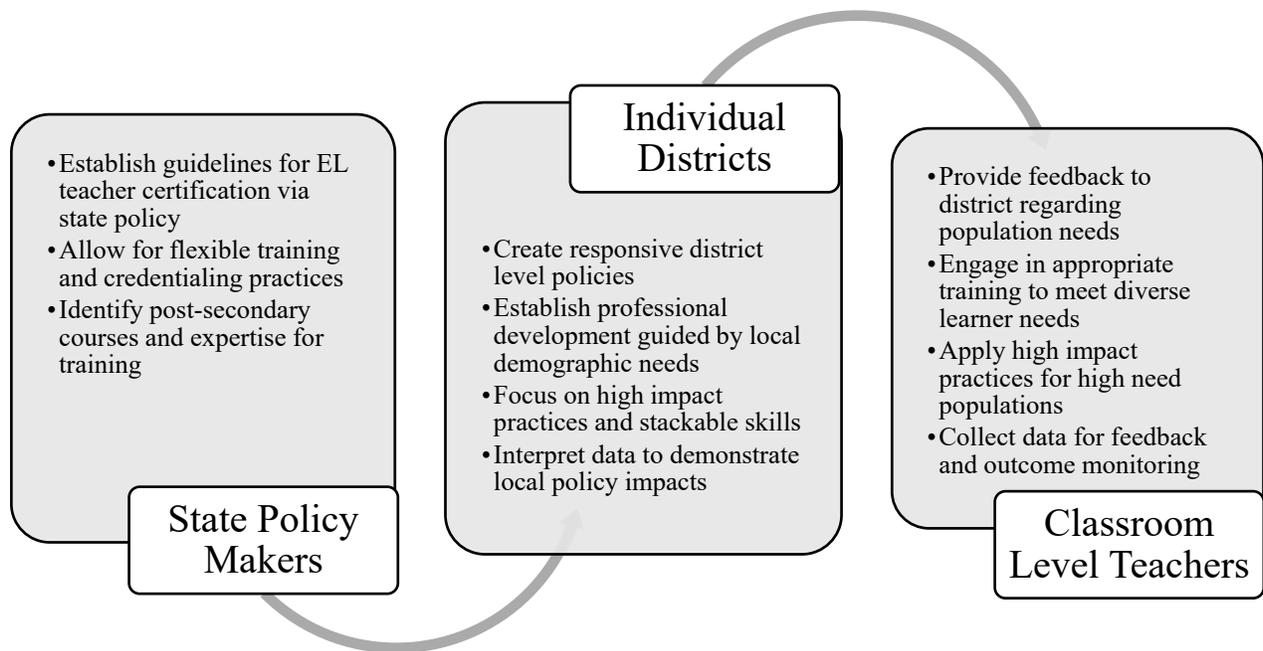


Figure 3. Dynamic Professional Development Models to Meet Local Needs

it is vital that all groups impacted by the professional development be included as stakeholders in the implementation plan. This means including stakeholders from diverse populations, as well as all levels of education stakeholders (i.e. teachers, administrators, state policymakers, and post-secondary experts), and ensuring that the viewpoints of all stakeholders are recognized and included in implementation. Second, because of the limited nature of the professional development, identifying

high impact practices is vital (Haneda & Wells, 2012; Markos, 2011). The de facto piecemeal approach that has long been implemented at the state level must be reexamined. By empowering districts, teachers, and local stakeholders to design targeted training at the local level, this policy framework will create dynamic opportunities to support educators in meeting the needs of all students, including those in low-incidence rural populations.

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