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How to Determine the Ideal State-Level Grant Initiatives to Pursue for Your Rural School District: A Texas Case Study

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Abstract

In rural school districts, superintendents face unique challenges related to teacher retention, resource constraints, and community integration. This study explores how targeted state-funded grants can enhance organizational capital, focusing on a rural district in Texas. Using a conceptual approach with case study examples, this paper examines the Texas Incentive Allotment (TIA), Grow Your Own (GYO), Teacher Residency TCLAS decision 5, Principal Residency Grant Cycle 1, and PTECH Grant. The findings highlight strategies for effective grant selection, implementation, and alignment with district goals. By forming strategic partnerships and focusing on human capital, the district demonstrated improved student outcomes, retention, and organizational stability.

Introduction

In rural Texas, school superintendents encounter unique challenges requiring a balance between operational demands and community engagement. Superintendents oversee budgeting, school improvement, human capital decisions, and community representation—all within the framework of policies that may not always align with local needs. Addressing these issues often requires the pursuit of external funding, especially in small districts where resources are limited.

One strategy for addressing these challenges involves leveraging state-funded grants, which can support initiatives tailored to the specific needs of rural communities. This study uses the example of a rural Texas district to demonstrate how such grants can enhance organizational capital, improve teacher recruitment and retention, and foster partnerships that contribute to student success. It presents a practical approach for superintendents considering similar funding opportunities by exploring the decision-making process and the impact of key grant programs, including TIA, GYO, TCLAS, Principal Residency, and PTECH.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on organizational leadership principles that underscore the importance of human and social capital in educational settings. Sergiovanni's (2007) hierarchy of leadership forces—technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural—serves as a foundational framework, illustrating that effective school leadership requires a balance of technical skills and cultural sensitivity. In rural districts, where schools often function as community hubs, these principles are particularly relevant. Sergiovanni's model highlights the need for leaders to foster trust, shared values, and a sense of belonging within their schools, all of which are essential in rural areas where the school plays an integral role in the community's identity and cohesion.

Building on this, the study also references Marzano's (2005) framework for district-level leadership responsibilities, which stresses the importance of establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and aligning resources to meet these objectives. This alignment is crucial in the context of state-funded grants, as it ensures that newly introduced programs support, rather than distract from, the district's core mission. Marzano's framework emphasizes the superintendent's role in setting clear, focused goals and mobilizing resources effectively—an especially challenging task in rural settings where budgets are often limited, and priorities must be managed carefully.

Together, Sergiovanni and Marzano's frameworks provide a lens for understanding how rural superintendents can leverage external funding to address unique challenges, such as teacher shortages and limited access to resources. By aligning grant initiatives with district and community goals, rural superintendents can adopt a strategic, culturally responsive approach that strengthens both school and community resilience.

Literature Review

In rural school districts, the role of the superintendent extends beyond instructional leadership to include a range of community-focused responsibilities. Sergiovanni's (2007) leadership model is instrumental in understanding this complex role, as it emphasizes that school leaders must integrate technical and cultural competencies to lead effectively. This model aligns with Marzano's (2005) theory, which identifies essential district-level responsibilities such as goal-setting, resource alignment, and establishing clear expectations for student achievement. These leadership principles are particularly relevant in rural contexts, where superintendents often serve as both educational leaders and community stakeholders.

Rural superintendents face distinct challenges that differentiate their roles from those of their urban and suburban counterparts. High turnover rates, geographic isolation, and limited access to resources often complicate their ability to attract and retain qualified staff, manage budgets, and implement programs effectively (DeYoung, 1995; Copeland, 2013). As DeYoung (1995) and Copeland (2013) highlight, rural superintendents often assume roles as planners, listeners, and community organizers which are the responsibilities critical to building supportive environments in areas where the school is closely tied to community identity. Copeland's (2013) findings emphasize the importance of community and political awareness, as rural superintendents must balance local values and expectations with state mandates and educational priorities. This nuanced role requires superintendents to be deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of their communities, reinforcing shared values and fostering local trust.

Given these challenges, external funding and grant opportunities have become increasingly vital for rural districts seeking to address resource limitations and meet district goals. Research by Bauch (2001) and Collins (1999) emphasizes that effective school-community partnerships are essential for rural districts, as they enable schools to access resources, expertise, and support beyond what is typically available locally. These partnerships are particularly significant when pursuing state-funded grants, as they allow districts to leverage external resources while aligning initiatives with community needs. According to Berry (2004) and Berry and Hirsch (2005), successful grant-funded initiatives often involve collaboration with local institutions, non-profits, and government agencies, enhancing the district's capacity to implement sustainable, impactful programs.

In terms of instructional leadership, research on rural education indicates that superintendents in small communities are often tasked with improving both academic and vocational outcomes to prepare students for diverse postsecondary pathways (Miller et al., 2017; Haggwood, 2008). Studies by Garcia et al. (2020) and Kilgore and Wagner (2017) highlight the role of dual-credit and career-focused programs in expanding opportunities for rural students, which aligns closely with grant-funded initiatives like P-TECH. Programs that focus on college and career readiness not only enhance students' future opportunities but also contribute to community workforce development, further integrating the school's mission with local economic goals.

This literature on rural superintendents' leadership challenges, coupled with theories of community-aligned leadership, contextualizes the critical role of grant funding in supporting rural districts. By aligning grant initiatives with district and community priorities, superintendents can address issues such as teacher retention, instructional quality, and program development in ways that are both strategic and culturally responsive. This strategic alignment of external resources with local goals enhances organizational capacity and strengthens the school's role as a community anchor, illustrating how state-funded grants can drive sustainable improvements in rural education.

Methods

In this practitioner action research (PAR) study, we use a narrative inquiry approach to examine the superintendent's experiences in securing and implementing state-funded grants. This

methodological framework enables an exploration of the decision-making processes, challenges, and impacts associated with these grants, with the aim of generating insights that could benefit similar rural districts.

Practitioner action research serves as an ideal foundation for this study, allowing the superintendent's firsthand experiences to shape the inquiry. As a form of applied research, PAR emphasizes reflective practice and continuous learning, making it well-suited to documenting the superintendent's engagement with the grants and the district's evolving response. Through this approach, we not only capture the superintendent's strategies and adjustments but also reflect on the broader implications of these actions for the district's goals and organizational culture.

Within this PAR framework, narrative inquiry allows us to document the superintendent's journey in implementing grants such as the Texas Incentive Allotment (TIA), Grow Your Own (GYO) program, Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports (TCLAS), and P-TECH. By focusing on the superintendent's reflections and decision-making processes, narrative inquiry provides a chronological, contextualized account of each grant's purpose, requirements, and implementation. This method allows us to delve into how the superintendent navigates complex choices, aligns each grant with the district's mission, and adapts to challenges in a rural setting.

To further assess the impact and integration of these grants, we employ discourse analysis to explore the broader dialogue surrounding each initiative. Analyzing meeting notes, staff feedback, and district performance data reveals how teachers, staff, and administrators perceive the grants' roles within the district. This discourse analysis sheds light on organizational culture, uncovering the beliefs and assumptions that influence how grants are received and implemented.

By examining these perspectives, we gain insight into whether the grants foster organizational capital and support a collaborative, mission-driven culture within the school environment. Although I am a co-researcher and author, the superintendent's role as both practitioner and participant provides a unique, embedded perspective that enriches the study. This dual role allows the superintendent to contribute personal insights and professional reflections that deepen our understanding of the implementation process. The practitioner-researcher lens ensures that the study is grounded in lived experience, offering a practical, nuanced view of how these grants function within a rural district and how they might be adapted to similar contexts.

By combining narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, and PAR, this study offers a multi-faceted view of grant implementation. Each methodological choice builds upon the other, creating a comprehensive approach that brings together reflective documentation, stakeholder perceptions, and practical insights. This integrated methodology ultimately aims to provide other rural districts with actionable guidance for leveraging state-funded grants to support capacity-building and organizational goals.

Case 1 Texas Incentive Allotment (TIA): The Texas Incentive Allotment (TIA) is a strategic grant initiative designed to enhance teacher retention and improve student outcomes, particularly in economically disadvantaged or rural districts. The TIA program provides additional compensation

to high-performing teachers, incentivizing excellence and promoting teacher retention in areas where recruitment and retention are often challenging (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). In implementing TIA, one district prioritized minimizing internal competition by creating a collaborative, transparent environment, making the program accessible to all teachers meeting specific performance criteria rather than restricting it to a limited number of top performers.

To prevent a competitive culture, the district structured TIA eligibility to include any teacher who met established performance criteria, with clear, early communication about the program's goals and requirements. This approach allowed 32 teachers to participate in the first year, with seven teachers achieving distinctions as Master, Exemplary, or Recommended teachers, resulting in a total of \$103,600 in awarded incentives. This early transparency and inclusivity contributed to a positive, collaborative response to the program.

In addition to financial rewards, TIA supported a district-wide culture of instructional improvement. Teachers who initially questioned the performance criteria received targeted professional development, fostering a commitment to ongoing growth. By the program's second year, the district further refined TIA by incorporating Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) for teachers without standardized pre/post assessments, ensuring the program's inclusivity across diverse teaching assignments. This district's implementation of TIA highlights how well-structured grant programs like TIA can advance both district goals and individual teacher development, positively impacting staff morale and student achievement (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

Case 2 Grow Your Own (GYO): The Grow Your Own (GYO) program aligns with the Texas school district's mission to invest in local talent and address teacher shortages in rural areas. GYO is designed to cultivate future educators from within the community by supporting high school students interested in teaching careers and providing resources for current teachers seeking advanced credentials (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Although well-suited to rural districts, the program faced challenges in implementation due to financial constraints. Many students in the program qualified for federal aid that covered a large portion of tuition costs, which limited the program's reach.

Despite these financial challenges, GYO successfully fostered a supportive culture for teaching careers within the district. For example, the district introduced a transition course to help students prepare for the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment, a requirement for dual credit participation. Additionally, the district partnered with a local community college to offer dual credit options, maximizing federal aid and using GYO funds for supplementary resources such as books and fees.

Although initial enrollment was lower than expected, GYO has succeeded in its primary goal: creating a community-driven teacher pipeline. The program has already seen two students begin education degrees, with several more progressing through various stages. The initial two students who completed the program enrolled in the Teacher Residency program and are now interns in that program at the district. The combination of the GYO and the teacher residency program creates a pipeline of future teachers who will remain in the community and become teachers

educated by and supported through the grant initiatives. This community-focused approach supports local recruitment efforts and aligns with Texas Education Agency (TEA) priorities in promoting teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

Case 3 TCLAS Decision 5 (Teacher Residency Program): The Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports (TCLAS) decision 5 residency program provided critical support to early-career teachers through a structured mentorship model designed to enhance instructional quality and school climate during the pandemic. Developed in collaboration with a Tier I University, TCLAS allowed the district to recruit two resident teachers, aiming to support new educators while bringing fresh, innovative ideas into the school environment (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

Through this residency program, one elementary and one secondary resident teacher worked alongside experienced mentors, allowing them to gain hands-on experience in a supportive setting. The district adopted the program's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to eliminate the post-residency commitment, anticipating that a nurturing and connected community would naturally retain these residents beyond the program. This approach proved successful; both residents became integral to school community efforts, contributing to extracurricular activities and building strong bonds with students and staff. When combined with the Grow Your Own initiative, the residency program can lead to a school and community pipeline of educators that will remain in the community and add depth and commitment to all parties participating.

While the TCLAS residency program faced logistical challenges—especially due to its rigorous reporting requirements—the district overcame these by having the superintendent serve as site coordinator. This role involved overseeing program implementation and ensuring alignment with the Tier I University and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) standards. Despite these demands, the residency program positively impacted the school environment. Students in classrooms with resident teachers demonstrated improved engagement and learning outcomes, reflecting the program's contributions to instructional quality and student success.

Case 4 Principal Residency Grant, Cycle 1: The Texas Education Agency (TEA) launched the Principal Residency Grant (Cycle 1) to address the need for well-prepared school leaders in Texas, particularly in high-needs districts. This program provided funding for school districts to implement year-long, job-embedded residency experiences for aspiring principals under the guidance of mentor principals. Participants in the program were placed in a residency position, where they could engage in key leadership tasks, receive targeted professional development, and build competencies in instructional leadership, school operations, and community engagement.

Often in a small rural school, the district will have little interest in open positions, receiving a small number of applications which are often unqualified and do not understand the dynamics associated with a small rural school. This leaves the school leadership in a quandary when attempting to fill high-profile, essential personnel. To combat such an issue, superintendents will recruit from other districts or reach out to former employees. The principal residency grant can be leveraged as an incentive in cases such as this and the district pursued the grant initiative to entice the return of a math teacher and coach/special education teacher.

The grant was awarded to the district for two principal residents. Once awarded, the district reached out to the two former teachers and offered the residency positions as an incentive. This allowed the two teachers to return to teach classes while earning their master's and principal certification, funded through the grant. The two teachers did return, earned the certifications, and now serve as leaders in the district. By seeking grant initiatives that create an incentive, the district was able to recruit and fill essential positions and create a leadership pipeline that will sustain the improvement capacity developed through retaining high-quality teachers and leaders.

Case 5 Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH): The Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) program is an innovative educational model that integrates high school, college, and workforce training to equip students with the skills and credentials needed for high-demand careers. Established to help address workforce readiness and educational attainment, P-TECH enables students to earn a high school diploma, an industry-recognized associate degree, and relevant workplace experience within a six-year timeframe at no cost to the students (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). This program is especially beneficial for students in rural areas where access to career training resources is often limited.

In implementing P-TECH, the district collaborated closely with a local community college and industry partners to create a curriculum that aligned with both academic and workforce standards. The program's pathways focused on high-demand fields such as healthcare, information technology, and advanced manufacturing, allowing students to gain hands-on experience and mentorship in their chosen fields. To prepare students for the program's academic rigor, the district introduced early preparation courses and provided dedicated advisors to guide students through the dual requirements of high school and college-level coursework.

In its first year, P-TECH enrolled 25 students, offering them access to dual-credit courses and real-world experience through internships and workplace visits. To ensure the program's continuous improvement, the district held regular feedback sessions with students, teachers, and industry mentors, using their input to adapt the program to better meet the needs of students and industry standards.

The district faced challenges with logistical coordination, particularly regarding transportation and scheduling for students attending off-campus courses and internships. To address these issues, the district provided transportation support and designed flexible class schedules, enabling students to balance their academic responsibilities with practical training requirements.

Through P-TECH, the district successfully created a pathway program that aligns with local workforce needs and enhances students' career readiness. By preparing students with both academic credentials and industry-relevant skills, the program contributes to community economic development and offers students in rural areas access to sustainable, high-demand career opportunities.

Discussion of Emerging Themes

Theme 1 Strategic Partnerships: The implementation of each grant relied heavily on strategic partnerships, which extended beyond the school to include the nearby community college, the nearby county's hospital district, and the nearby Tier I University. These partnerships enabled the district to overcome limitations in staffing, resources, and expertise, especially through dual credit and workforce training programs. Each partnership was grounded in mutual trust and aligned goals, which were essential for successful implementation.

For instance, in the PTECH program, the district collaborated with the community college and local healthcare providers to establish a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) pathway. This partnership allowed students to gain real-world skills and certification upon graduation, enhancing their employability while supporting community workforce needs.

Theme 2 Enhanced Organizational Capital: Each grant initiative focused on strengthening organizational capital, especially through human capital development. The TIA and GYO programs were directly tied to teacher recruitment and retention, ensuring that the district could attract and keep highly qualified educators. By structuring these grants to reward commitment and effectiveness, the district was able to foster a professional culture focused on student success.

The residencies and principal preparation programs also played significant roles, providing hands-on training and development that benefited both the residents and their mentors. These programs have reinforced a culture of learning and improvement that is essential for meeting district and community expectations.

Theme 3 Improved Student Opportunity and Learning: A shared objective across all grant-funded initiatives was to improve student outcomes through enhanced learning opportunities. The P-TECH program enabled students to earn certifications, while TIA directly impacted instructional quality by incentivizing teacher effectiveness. These programs increased students' access to rigorous academic pathways and career-oriented training, better preparing them for postsecondary success.

The district's partnership with the community college to expand dual credit offerings contributed to a rise in the number of students graduating with college credits. By aligning these initiatives with the TEA's priorities, the district not only improved student achievement but also reinforced its mission to support the community's economic and social development.

Recommendations for Rural Schools Pursuing Grant Initiatives

This section outlines a practical roadmap for superintendents and educational leaders seeking to effectively secure and implement state-funded grants. Each step, drawn from the superintendent's grant pursuit process, is designed to align grant initiatives with district needs and strategic goals, creating sustainable improvements in school systems. The following recommendations can guide districts through each phase, from selecting grants to ensuring their long-term success.

Identify Grants Aligned with District Needs: Begin by selecting grants that align closely with your district's mission and address specific challenges, such as teacher recruitment, instructional quality, or student engagement. Prioritizing grants that offer a strong potential for positive impact, especially within a rural context, maximizes their benefits and ensures relevance to the district's unique needs.

Ensure Compatibility with District Goals: Assess each grant's requirements carefully to ensure they reinforce rather than conflict with your district's strategic priorities. This involves reviewing the grant's objectives, timelines, and stipulations. Aligning grants with district goals helps maintain organizational cohesion and reduces the risk of introducing conflicting initiatives.

Collaborate to Adapt Policies and Practices: Engage stakeholders in adapting district policies and practices to meet grant requirements. For example, the superintendent modified the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the TCLAS residency program to remove a post-residency commitment, instead encouraging long-term retention through community involvement. This collaborative process ensures that new policies align with both grant expectations and district values, fostering broader support.

Monitor and Sustain Grant-Funded Programs: Ensure the long-term impact of grant-funded programs by continuously monitoring their progress. Collect performance data and feedback from staff to evaluate program effectiveness and identify areas for adjustment. Regular monitoring not only helps maintain program quality but also supports ongoing stakeholder investment, enhancing the likelihood of sustained success.

By following these recommendations, district leaders can secure grants that align with their mission, integrate funding into district practices seamlessly, and foster enduring improvements in their schools. This structured, reflective approach not only strengthens organizational capacity but also serves as a replicable model for other rural districts seeking to leverage state-funded grants effectively.

Implications and Conclusion

The Texas Education Agency's strategic funding initiatives have created meaningful opportunities for rural districts to address systemic challenges. By evaluating and implementing these grants in alignment with district goals, the district successfully enhanced its organizational capital, improved teacher retention, and expanded student opportunities. This case study demonstrates that rural superintendents can leverage external funding to create sustainable improvements, provided they foster strategic partnerships and prioritize community alignment.

The experiences at the school district underscore the importance of leadership that is both visionary and practical. For rural districts considering similar funding opportunities, a careful analysis of community needs and organizational capacity is essential. When grants are implemented with fidelity and aligned with a shared mission, they can have a transformative impact on student success and district stability.

As rural districts continue to navigate resource limitations, state-funded grant initiatives offer a viable pathway for addressing critical issues. By investing in human capital and forming collaborative partnerships, rural superintendents can create resilient school environments that support both academic and community growth.

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