Facts and Figures About Median Household Income in the U.S.

**Question:** What was the median household income in non-metro counties in the U.S. in 2009?

**Answer:** $40,135. That compares to $51,522 in metro counties.


Everyone a Stakeholder: D. P. Cooper Elementary Leverages Rural Assets for Students and Community

Ask around South Carolina’s Pee Dee Region about D. P. Cooper and you’re likely to hear “Marching Band!” The small rural elementary school has earned no small fame for its Marching Lions’ Band — numbering some 100 members in grades two through six.

The band regularly performs at community events and at other functions throughout the area, including the Andrews High School Homecoming Parade and the Benedict College Homecoming Parade.

D. P. Cooper Elementary School enrolls about 200 students from Child Development (the school’s pre-K program) through 6th grade. It serves the communities of Blakely, Trio, Sutton, Salters, Andrews, and Lane in Williamsburg County, situated near the Pee Dee River.

**Arts Matter**

The Marching Lions Band was started in the 2006–07 school year, the same year that principal Kerry Singleton, Ed.D., and curriculum specialist Judy Morris came to the school. Students learn to play by ear and to read music under the direction of Jonathan Chandler, the school’s band director. Chandler was named Williamsburg County School District Teacher of the Year in 2012. “There’s a correlation between reading music and high achievement,” says Singleton, explaining the emphasis on music and reading musical notation.

The band is an important part of the school, and the community has worked hard to make the band possible. Rural schools in South Carolina are among the most poorly funded in the U.S. and D. P. Cooper is no exception. (This
Students enjoy a fun breakfast while reading the Dr. Seuss book, Green Eggs and Ham.

D. P. Cooper Elementary School’s kindergartners receive a healthy snack after a lesson on fruits and vegetables.

year the school suffered a 21.7% decrease in per pupil funding, for example.) So it fell to the community to raise money for uniforms, instruments, flags, batons, and other equipment. That’s no small feat in this community where most people travel at least an hour to work in the state’s coastal tourism destinations.

Our community is very rural and parents and residents have worked hard for the school,” says Morris. The band has helped to repay that work with the positive attention it as brought to the community.

The band is not the only arts program the community has helped support. D. P. Cooper also has two choruses (one for students in the school’s Child Development program through second grade and one for third through sixth grades, each with about 40 members) and the D. P. C. Praise Dance Team. The choruses and praise dance team also perform frequently, traveling to area nursing homes, adult day care programs, and other events. They recently took part in the dedication of a local park. The school also sponsors a Cheerleading and Dance Team that performs at athletic events in correlation with the Williamsburg County Recreation Department.

In addition to its performing arts groups, D. P. Cooper also offers a visual arts program — a rarity in the rural South — in partnership with the Williamsburg County school district. Latrice Durant, a third grader, was a 2013 South Carolina Economic Poster Content winner. Rooms are painted in bright welcoming colors and student work is prominently displayed.

The arts curriculum brings positive attention to the school and is integral to Cooper’s strong academic program and outstanding achievement.

And those achievements are many. The school has continuously met Adequate Yearly Progress targets since 2008. It has won Palmetto Gold Awards for Academic Achievement & Closing the Achievement Gap. It has been named a School of Choice in South Carolina every year since 2009. It achieved a HealthierUS Gold School Award in 2008–09 and was a National Career Development Association Award winner at region, state, and national levels in 2010 and 2011.

Roots of success

To what does D. P. Cooper Elementary attribute its success? “Hard-working dedicated staff,” says Singleton. “Most of our staff members are from the community. They have family here and children. They’re very committed to the students and to the best possible outcomes for everyone. We’re a very family-oriented school. And,” Singleton adds immediately, “the community is very involved and has done a lot of fund-raising. We have been blessed to have many academic experiences for students because our staff and partners in the community go the extra mile.”

The direct involvement of the community is a huge asset for Cooper. Members of the Alumni Association, which is made up of alumni of the three former schools (Blakely, Williamsburg, and Cooper) now served by D. P. Cooper, help out at school regularly. And there is strong involvement from the Trio Action Community Organization, Gideon Masonic Lodge #428, Cedar Grove Chapter of the Eastern Star, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, local churches, and businesses. Participants in the Foster Grandparents program, a partnership with the county’s Vital Aging program, are in the school daily. These community volunteers are an integral part of the school’s team.

Our Foster Grandparents work directly with students, reading with them, tutoring, helping with homework,” explains Morris. “They take kids under their wing and encourage them. And they don’t just provide academic support, but emotional support, too. They really love the children and are loving role models for them.”

The school incorporates volunteers with staff. “The Grandparents are part of our team, our family,” explains
Rena McCrea is a Foster Grandparent at D. P. Cooper Elementary School. Here she is speaking at a parenting workshop at the school.

Singleton. “They participate in staff development with us; they are a big support for teachers.”

Parents and community residents appreciate the school’s attention and commitment to students, and recognize Singleton’s leadership. “Parents of D. P. Cooper are fortunate to have a principal who understands that our students must be adequately prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow’s workforce,” says Willie Graham, President of the D. P. Cooper Elementary School Parent Teacher Association.

Cooper’s achievements mean a lot to the Williamsburg school district as well. “We are proud of our community school, D. P. Cooper Elementary,” says Alfred L. Darby, a member of the district school board. “Principal Singleton and Mrs. Judy Morris, as well as the dedicated staff members, are great educators with an exceptional concern for their students.”

**Leveraging rural assets**

Like many rural schools, Cooper’s community is not steeped in resources that are generally in place for schools with such outstanding accomplishments. Other challenges are familiar in rural areas as well: the facility could use improvements, jobs are few and distant, funding for technology has had to come primarily from grants, and the school has lost grades to consolidation.

Yet the school has marshaled the resources of its rural community — the good will, the hard work, the commitment to its children, the proximity of residents to the school, and the fact that community and school are small enough for everyone to know each other.

In a small setting each person’s contributions matter. Everyone knows everyone and is involved in some way,” says Morris. “It really is like a family.”

**Community commitment**

Cooper is intentional about being a contributing institution in its community — not only in making sure its students are achieving at high levels, but in helping to create common purpose, pride, and a sense of place. Most importantly, perhaps, Cooper recognizes that it takes everyone to have a great school and it treats its community as an equal partner.

That strong sense of interpersonal connection and openness between school and community were once common qualities in many rural schools. D. P. Cooper has worked hard to maintain openness and build connections, recognizing them as bedrock to success.

We try to be true and fair to all stakeholders, and we see everyone in the school and community as a stakeholder,” says Singleton, “We want to keep open lines of communication to everyone.”

Doris Williams, Executive Director of the Rural Trust recently spoke with staff at D. P. Cooper and had this to say: “They work really hard, are committed to helping their students develop to their fullest potential, and have a great spirit. They understand their role as a community of educators and learners. They model so many things that are good about good rural schools: intimate relationship with the community, mutual respect between school and community, inclusion of arts in the curriculum, teachers who are indigenous to the community. They know who they are and where they are, and they use their resources really well.”

D. P. Cooper Elementary School is a great example of what’s possible when rural communities and schools join forces to develop their own resources and work together to benefit everyone, especially the community’s children.

*Read more about D. P. Cooper Elementary:*
See the website of D. P. Cooper Elementary School, with information about the school and photos guaranteed to make your day:


Coverage in *The News*, Kingstree, South Carolina, which explores the philosophy of D. P. Cooper as it relates to art, collaboration and community, character, and achievement.

**Part I:**

- [http://www.wcsd.k12.sc.us/education/page/download.php?fileinfo=TmV3cy5qcGc6Ojovd3d3L3NjaG9vbHIMvc2MvcmVtb3RiL21tYWdlcy9hdHRhY2gvMzMxNDUvMjYxMjBfMzMxNDVfYXR0YWNoXzQwMjQuanBn](http://www.wcsd.k12.sc.us/education/page/download.php?fileinfo=TmV3cy5qcGc6Ojovd3d3L3NjaG9vbHIMvc2MvcmVtb3RiL21tYWdlcy9hdHRhY2gvMzMxNDUvMjYxMjBfMzMxNDVfYXR0YWNoXzQwMjQuanBn)

**Part II:**

- [http://www.wcsd.k12.sc.us/education/page/download.php?fileinfo=TmV3czIuanBnOjo6L3d3dy9zY2hvbxL3NjL3JlbWFnZXZmdGVyX3VzZXMwMjTvM2FtcGxhdGJvZ3J5b3VudHJvb3NlbmFib290XzQwMjQuanBn](http://www.wcsd.k12.sc.us/education/page/download.php?fileinfo=TmV3czIuanBnOjo6L3d3dy9zY2hvbxL3NjL3JlbWFnZXZmdGVyX3VzZXMwMjTvM2FtcGxhdGJvZ3J5b3VudHJvb3NlbmFib290XzQwMjQuanBn)

This news report from WCBD Channel 2 News in Charleston features the Marching Lions’ Band:


Video of D. P. Cooper Chorus:

- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4T_q-nR5cY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4T_q-nR5cY)

Videos of D. P. Cooper Marching Lions’ Band:

- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPof0GUa7XA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPof0GUa7XA)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFs1nNy2zcA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFs1nNy2zcA)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgjQ_zRc83Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgjQ_zRc83Q)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8QauEq_UVs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8QauEq_UVs)

**Schools Prove They Can Make Dramatic Improvements With Their Own Teachers: No Sanctions Necessary**

“Teachers want to be successful,” says Sabrina Greiten, principal at Coalinga Middle School in California.

In struggling schools, however, teachers often don’t have the resources or supports that make it possible to succeed. The Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network, which, in 2010, won a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant with matching support from the Rural Trust, is proving that formerly low-performing schools can create for themselves the healthy cultures that prioritize students and lead to rich learning experiences for everyone.

Coalinga Middle, located on the edge of Coalinga, California (pop. 13,543) is a member of the Network. After three years the school has seen remarkable changes. “This process puts tools in teachers’ hands and supports them in their every day experience,” says Greiten.

That runs counter to prevailing education policy over the past 30 years. During the last several decades, U.S. education policy has focused on identifying “failing” schools, those where students don’t score well on standardized tests, and on prodding improvement using competition and punitive sanctions. Schools are typically subjected to a succession of top-down reform interventions, most of which have failed to produced sustainable long-term results. Teachers are increasingly blamed for low test scores and, in some states, penalized in pay systems and job protections.

The School Transformation Network uses a process that is both deceptively simple and richly complex to focus on improving school culture and climate through teacher collaboration and shared leadership. With a healthy culture in place and good learning opportunities for everyone, teacher commitment and enthusiasm surge, instructional practice improves, parental involvement escalates, and student test scores soar.

The Network is an effort of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (The National Forum) through its Schools to Watch® (STW) initiative. The National Forum works to “promote the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents,” with a focus on students in grades five through eight, regardless of the grade configuration of the school.

The Forum has identified four domains of high-performing middle-grades schools: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and norms to “support and sustain [the school’s] trajectory toward excellence.”
Through its Schools to Watch initiative, the Forum identifies middle-grades schools that excel in all four domains. State STW Networks in 19 states help identify schools and implement Schools to Watch programs.

Deborah Kasak is Executive Director of the National Forum’s Schools to Watch initiative. "We can show that we can turn around a school by creating the culture and climate to promote excellence in the education of young adolescents,” she says.

The School Transformation Network includes 18 schools, six of which are in rural areas or small towns and all of which were persistently low performing when they joined the Network. The effort aims to build capacity in the schools, improve academic performance, and close achievement gaps.

**A process toward a positive school culture**

“This is not a program, it’s a process,” says Jim Butler, principal at Hamlet Middle School in Hamlet, North Carolina (pop 6,494), one of the small town schools participating in the Network. “Every school will be different. It’s not like the programs that force everyone to do A, B, C, and D with the promise that you will get X result. In this process, you get a lot of support, but this is something you do yourself, you make it your own.”

That process is focused on building the trust, knowledge, quality relationships, leadership skills, and positive school culture and climate that empower teachers to focus on instruction and student needs. These qualities undergird academic excellence, developmental appropriateness, and social equity — corresponding with the qualities identified by the National Forum as essential for high-performing middle-grades schools.

The process is implemented through structures designed to support collaboration and shared leadership and by the STW Self Study and Rating Rubric, which guides best practices and helps school faculties know where to focus their energies. It is unified through a constant focus on students and on improving instructional practice.

**Structures for Collaboration and Shared Leadership**

“We start by asking how each student can be known personally and how communications can be strengthened,” explains Kasak. "We often establish teams or small schools-within-schools that make it possible for teachers to collaborate for a year or longer with the same group of students. Those structures help people get to know each other more easily, creating a more intimate experience for everyone.”

Team teachers share a common planning time. “The common planning time makes it possible for teachers to discuss and collaborate on all aspects of their practice, especially curriculum and instruction and student needs and issues,” says Kasak. “They can easily track where each student is in terms of grades, attendance, behavior.” Teachers also participate in Professional Learning Communities.

In addition to structures for collaboration, schools in the Network also create structures of shared leadership that give all teachers meaningful input in key decisions related to instruction, school policy, and governance. These leadership structures make it possible for teachers to implement their ideas and to make necessary changes as they move forward.

**A rubric for self-study and teacher empowerment**

The STW Self Study and Rating Rubric includes questions related to each of the four domains and provides the school faculty a way to think about its practices and structures and how to improve them. Teachers complete the questionnaire at the beginning of the process and periodically thereafter.

“The rubric is a unified tool to help schools look at themselves,” says Kasak. “It helps teachers develop a vision and pathways for achieving that vision and gives them much more input and say-so in the school.”

Greiten says the rubric helps a school, especially a school with many challenges, “know where to start.” And, she adds, because teachers complete the rubric themselves and decide together where to focus their energies they know their input is valued.

**Coaching and school visits**

The i3 grant provides funds for two additional supports that are especially valuable to struggling rural schools. The first is coaching. Each school in the Network gets a school coach and a principal coach. Coaches each spend a lot of time in the school observing, listening, and supporting the faculty as it carries out the work of self-transformation. The fact that the coaches go to the rural school and get to know it well helps overcome the isolation that characterizes many rural schools. More importantly, coaches tailor support and guidance to the unique circumstances of the particular school. Both Butler and Greiten credit the coaches with providing collegial interaction that have strengthened their schools’ outcomes.
The grant also provides funds for teachers to visit STW schools and to attend high quality conferences focused on issues the school is addressing. It’s another way to overcome isolation and provide teachers with exposure to what instruction rooted in best practices looks like in a well-functioning school. All the teachers at both Hamlet and Coalinga have visited a STW school at least once. Greiten calls the opportunity “revolutionary.” Both she and Butler say the visits have given teachers ideas for their practice and confidence that they can achieve similar results.

**Happier teachers, stronger schools**

“The process helps teachers feel and be more efficacious,” says Kasak. “They can take care of things quickly and focus on students and student needs.”

Both Hamlet and Coalinga have made impressive improvements in student test scores since joining the School Transformation Network. At Hamlet proficiency rates jumped twenty percent. Coalinga made Safe Harbor last year and is on track to make Safe Harbor for the second time this year, which would move the school out of Program Improvement status. Hamlet has won designation as a Schools to Watch.

“Our teachers feel so much pride,” says Butler. “They know they are doing something important.”

Greiten adds that teachers at Coalinga can’t wait to show off successes in their classrooms and are preparing to present at conferences in California, something they have never done. “It’s a completely different school,” she says.

Kasak says that teachers routinely report that they work harder because of the STW process, “But they also say that they have more energy and are a lot happier because they have so much more control, good support, and are effective with their students.”

The process has demonstrated that the majority of teachers, even in so-called failing schools are anxious to be successful and are committed to student learning. With strong collaborative structures, targeted learning opportunities directed to their needs, and meaningful voice in school decisions, teachers can and will turn a struggling school into a thriving one. No punitive sanctions allowed.

**Big turnarounds: Two schools share their stories**

Both Butler and Coalinga Middle Schools house grades six through eight; both are three years into the process; both had been identified as persistently low-performing; both have diverse student populations and free/reduced lunch rates over 70%. At Coalinga, half the students are English Language Learners. Throughout the transformation process both schools have retained most of their faculty.

In “Building a Great School: No Punitive Sanctions Allowed,” Butler and Greiten offer down-to-earth, often-humorous descriptions of how their schools have made significant changes in structure, instruction, and culture and what their inspiring results have been.

Read their stories below.

**Building a Great School: No Punitive Sanctions Allowed**

Three years ago, things at Coalinga Middle School in Coalinga, California (pop. 13,543) seemed as bad as they could get. Sabrina Greiten had taught at the school for several years and was serving as Assistant Principal at the time. “The culture was toxic, teachers barely spoke to each other, and achievement was really low,” she says. Greiten was named principal two years ago.

Things weren’t nearly so dysfunctional at Hamlet Middle School in Hamlet, North Carolina (pop. 6,494). The school was beginning to recover from a long slump, but ties with the community were weak and a lot of students were struggling. “We were making progress before the STW process began,” says Jim Butler, the school’s principal. “And with this process we’ve been able to accelerate those gains.”

Both schools had been identified as persistently low performing, meaning they were dealing with sanctions tied to low student test scores.

Three years later Coalinga and Hamlet Middle Schools are thriving examples of what happens when quality relationships are prioritized and teachers are empowered with trust, support, and structures to collaborate with each other and get to know students personally. Teachers are happy and committed, community and parent relations are stronger than ever, and student achievement is soaring.

These big changes were made possible by the schools’ participation in the Schools to Watch: School Transformation
Students at Hamlet Middle School.

Network, an effort of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. The effort, part of the National Forum’s Schools to Watch initiative, won a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant in 2010. The Rural Trust provided matching support for the grant to work in six schools located in rural areas and small towns. Altogether, eighteen middle schools are part of the Network.

Deborah Kasak is Executive Director of the National Forum’s Schools to Watch initiative. “The National Forum knows the key factors that are in place in great middle-grades schools and we have identified hundreds of schools that meet those criteria,” she explains. “We have worked through Schools to Watch for over a decade and can demonstrate that we know how to turn around a school and create a culture and climate to promote excellence in the education of young adolescents.”

The Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network has supported member schools by providing coaches, opportunities to visit STW schools, and access to the experience and knowledge of the National Forum. Together these resources make it possible for schools to build a culture of trust, collaboration and shared leadership to drive big changes and focus the school’s energy on instruction and student outcomes.

In this RPM feature story, Greiten and Butler describe what Coalinga and Hamlet have done. Their stories offer nuts-and-bolts practicality, meaningful insight about what inspires human change, and all the humor required to work with young adolescents. They touch on the key features of the STW process, which — although addressed separately in this story — are, in practice, tightly interwoven and mutually supporting.

Structures to Personalize the School:

“A high-performing middle-grades school knows well how it can go about knowing each student,” says Kasak. An early goal in the process is to create small structures that enable everyone — students and teachers — to be known personally and to have voice. Usually that involves organizing students and teachers into teams or creating small schools-within-a-school where people work together for a year or longer.

At Hamlet, teachers were already organized in teams and were also working in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). That wasn’t the case, however, at Coalinga. So, in the first year of the process Linda Hopping, Coaling’s school coach and a long-time middle school teacher and principal, worked with Assistant Principal Greiten to develop a master schedule for Coalinga that would organize teams and give all teachers on each team a common planning time.

“Teaming empowers teachers working with each other for kids,” Hopping says.

“When teachers work together in teams and share a common planning time, they can more easily discuss and collaborate on all aspects of curriculum and instruction,” says Kasak. “It gives them more opportunities to focus on student needs and issues and address problems quickly and effectively.”

The STW Rubric: “Teachers Charting the Course”

The touchstone of the STW process is the STW Self Study and Rating Rubric, which is intended to help schools study and rate their own practices. Teachers complete the questionnaire at the start of the process and periodically as they continue their work.

“The rubric is a unified tool to help schools look at themselves,” says Kasak. “It helps teachers develop a vision and pathways for achieving that vision and gives them much more input and say-so in the school.”

The rubric may be downloaded and used freely by any middle grades or secondary school, although it may not be adapted without written permission.

The rubric addresses the four domains deemed essential by the National Forum. Those domains are Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and Organizational Structures and Processes.

Each domain includes general criteria that reflect best practices and concrete examples of excellence. These criteria guide the development of a positive school culture focused on students. For example, Criteria 8 in Academic Excellence is: The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice. One example of evidence is: Teachers collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work.
Teachers individually rate the school — not their own practice — on each criterion. Then the faculty studies the results and decides where they want to begin to focus their attention.

Coalinga Middle was in Year Two of the STW process when Greiten became principal. She says the school “had been in ‘program improvement’ forever.” Teachers were isolated, relationships strained, and morale was very low. Every couple of years a new reform program was imposed on the school, only to fail. “Those models weren’t sustainable. They didn’t involve teachers in charting the course,” she says.

The STW rubric is different because teachers complete it, then they look at their own ratings of the school and decide what they think would be most useful to do. Greiten says the rubric helps make those decisions clearer. “When I became principal I knew I believed in teachers but we didn’t have a roadmap or anyone to steer the boat. When everything needs to be fixed, where do you start? The rubric provides teachers with a common language. They look at their own ratings and say, ‘Oh, we start here.’ Everyone is involved in deciding how to steer. Teachers know they are listened to and their feedback matters.”

Hopping had already been coach at Coalinga for a year when Greiten became principal. She explains the value of the rubric in helping teachers think about their work. “Teachers look at their rubric scores and pick an area where they think their work will have the biggest impact. You don’t do it all at once.” As teachers continue their collaboration they keep returning to the rubric. “You look for things you haven’t addressed yet — what’s your next best shot?” Hopping says. “The rubric drives change.”

Teachers at Hamlet Middle began their interactions with the rubric a little differently. Butler explains: “The first time we did the rubric we thought very highly of ourselves,” he laughs. “But there was a lack of understanding of what the rubric meant. Our school coach helped faculty break down the rubric and pressed them for evidence and the thinking behind their ratings.” He continues, “When we did the rubric six or eight months later we rated ourselves much tighter. Now that we understand the rubric, it naturally leads to goal-setting. It gives you something to come back to, a way to focus your energies.”

The rubric provides teachers and schools a common language to talk about what they are doing and a way to measure progress. It helps teachers decide their next steps, determine whether something they tried was successful, and fine tune their strategies. In other words, it motivates continuous improvement — directed largely by teachers.

**Shared Leadership: “The Single Most Powerful Thing in Building Trust”**

If the STW rubric helps teachers understand and assess their school and articulate its next steps toward improvement, shared leadership is the vehicle that makes implementation of those ideas possible.

“The single most powerful thing in building the trust necessary to make positive and sustainable change in a school is a good shared leadership approach,” says Hopping. She helped set up the Leadership Team at Coalinga Middle. “There are representatives of every area of the school. They meet every week. Ideas and suggestions run through the Leadership Team and back to teachers for their input and then to the Leadership Team for more reflection before decisions are made.”

Hopping credits Greiten with supporting the Leadership Team and freeing it to do its work. “Sabrina really wanted teachers to help mold the school. She trusted them to do their job and they trust her to support them.”

Butler says the first thing they did at Hamlet as part of the STW process was to establish a Leadership Team. “It had immediate impact. It gives people real voice in school decisions. That ownership from the staff makes all the difference. They love creating things to make the school work,” he says. “That makes my job much easier, and I get more honest feedback from the teachers. It’s the trust factor.”

Ken McEwin is Professor Emeritus at Appalachian State University and is conducting a case study of Hamlet Middle.
Coalinga Middle School teachers Mr. Sorrick, Mrs. Hendrix, and Ms. Laird in a Data Team meeting.

Coalinga Middle School teachers Mr. Sorrick, Mrs. Hendrix, and Ms. Laird in a Data Team meeting.

School. He says that in his interviews teachers express a strong sense of trust and ownership. “They really feel like they are part of a team that is doing great things and that every one has a part to play.”

McEwin notes that the strong relationships at Hamlet make it much easier to focus on academic success. He also points out that trust and acceptance are among the most important values in relationships with young adolescents and crucial to their healthy development. “Practicing and modeling those values throughout the school is one of the most important things a middle school can do,” he says.

Hopping says that creating an atmosphere of trust at Coalinga had a large, measurable, and nearly immediate impact on students. “The culture was so negative and teachers so disengaged when Ms. Greiten became principal. That year we just focused on building trust: working with the rubric, listening to teachers, supporting teams and getting the Leadership Team functioning. We had not yet even addressed instruction. But student scores went up so significantly the school made Safe Harbor. That’s how important strengthening relationships and building trust among adults is.”

Coaches: Partners and “Proofreaders”

Jim Butler had been a principal for nine years when he learned that the four middle schools in Richmond County would be part of the i3 School Transformation Network and he would be getting a principal coach. “I admit that when I first heard, I was not entirely happy,” he says. But three years into the process Butler is a staunch advocate for coaches and what they bring to a school.

Richmond County had made the transition from junior high to middle schools in the 2008–09 school year. “We were already coming back up in our student outcomes,” Butler says. “The coaching process helped positive things happen a lot faster. The coaches have built a great rapport with the staff. My coach, Cathy Tomon, is a principal at a STW school and our school coach, Ann Bullock, is also a principal. That’s crucial. You can talk things over with them and they have perspective and ideas. It’s like having someone else proofread your work; they can see things you’re too close to see. And we have ideas here at Hamlet that they use in their own schools.”

The i3 School Transformation Network grant provides a principal coach and a school coach for each school. For the first several months, the coaches spend time observing and getting to know the school and its faculty personally. “We have to let teachers know that we are not there to evaluate them, we won’t be going to the principal to report on them,” says Hopping.

Gradually, as coaches build trust they begin working more directly with school staff. They help the school figure out ways to create structures to support collaboration and help teams work effectively by learning strategies for managing conflict, working with parents, using data, and planning instruction. They are available to listen, offer feedback, and brainstorm ideas. And they accompany groups of teachers to conferences and on visits to STW schools.

Deborah Kasak explains: “The coaches are with the school for four years. They are partners with the school and its teachers and provide lots of supports and ways for staff to learn. Once relationships are established and people realize the coaches are not just going to go away, the schools and then the districts become hungry for what they bring.”

Hopping and Greiten laugh about who calls the other the most. And they both agree that they can’t wait to share ideas, report successes, and hear what the other one is thinking. “Without coaching I couldn’t have done it,” says Greiten. “Things come up and you need someone to bounce ideas off of. Every step I had Linda. She is not just an expert, she also knows our staff really well. I also had a principal coach, Scott Steele, Director of Educational Services for Clovis Unified School District. His school is an hour away and he responds immediately any time I have questions. We also get together every six weeks to talk about how things are going.”

Because the coaches spend time really getting to know the school, listening to teachers, and providing support, they have proved that they are on the side of kids, the teachers, and the school. “We need coaches,” says Greiten. “In some ways it’s easier for teachers to hear an ‘outsider’ who’s not their boss. It’s a different kind of relationship.”

Having coaches who go to the school and work directly with teachers is especially important in rural schools that are distant from the usual sources of professional support. Usually rural teachers are expected to travel to professional development events, many of which are not targeted to their needs and are delivered by people who do not know their circumstances.

“The fact that coaches come to them is important to teachers,” says Kasak. “It links the school and its teachers to
something bigger and brings access to information and perspective that may not be available through other avenues. There is real power in sitting with someone who is pulling for you and offers meaningful support and direction.”

**School Visits and Conferences: “Revolutionary”**

Coaching addresses one aspect of the isolation that characterizes many struggling rural schools because it brings attention, concern, and support to the place in which teachers actually practice.

The School Transformation Network addresses another aspect of rural teachers’ professional isolation by providing funds for teachers to visit high-performing schools (usually STW schools) and to attend conferences, opportunities that are typically beyond the school’s regular budget. For teachers who have had little exposure to such schools, the experience can be eye-opening and extremely empowering, particularly in the context of the other supports in place in the STW process.

In her first year as principal, Greiten made sure her faculty had opportunities to attend conferences of the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) and to visit nearby STW schools. There are four conferences a year in different parts of the state, so nearby schools are in very different circumstances. No one was forced to go, but teams could only attend if every team member was able to participate.

“It was so revolutionary,” says Greiten. “Teachers were allowed to observe in classrooms and to sit in on Professional Learning Communities in those schools. They saw teacher collaborations that were totally focused on and directed at kids. It was a huge light bulb going on: ‘professionals talk about kids in professional ways.’”

Coach Hopping often accompanied the groups, usually six or seven teachers and an administrator. “Part of my job is to ask essential questions,” she says. “We will observe, then step outside and talk about what we see, and then return to observe some more. At the end of the day we de-brief. When we get back to Coalinga we talk about what we learned, what we want to try in our teams, and what ideas we want to take to the Leadership Team.”

“Eighty percent of the changes we’ve made came from an idea that was sparked in a team visit to a conference or school,” says Greiten. Because teachers work in teams, share common prep time, and participate in school governance through the Leadership Team, teachers have the means to make changes. That boosts their confidence and inspires more changes.

Butler says school visits are an important part of the process at Hamlet Middle. “After we had decided where we wanted to focus our attention, groups of teachers visited schools that were strong in areas we wanted to work on. Teachers came back with ideas and our staff planned how we could adapt those ideas to work for us.”

Butler says it was important to staff to visit schools whose circumstances and demographics mirrored those at Hamlet. “They wanted to see how schools with similar resources and challenges were being successful.”

Hopping understands why teachers want to go to a school similar to their own. “Rural schools usually start out with less and they often have more challenges,” she says. “Teachers, especially in low-performing rural schools, are nervous about how they are perceived and feel defensive about being blamed. They may not have felt good about themselves or their schools.”

However, Hopping sees value in teachers observing in well-financed, affluent schools. “At first teachers did not want to visit schools with better resources and students with a lot of out-of-school opportunities. But we put the focus on looking at what those schools were doing in the classroom. I told them, ‘It’s not about demographics, it’s about practice, so what can we learn from their practice?’”

Hopping is not discounting the problems of school under-funding. She is quick to point out that there are no classroom computers at Coalinga Middle and that the school doesn’t have money to offer any kind of music program even though many of the kids have a rich musical heritage and accessing it would surely enhance their experience and improve learning. Without the i3 grant there would be no funding for coaches or school visits. But asking teachers to focus on practice shifts the focus from what isn’t available at Coalinga to what teachers can do with what is available in order to meet students where they are.

“We visited a school in one of the richest districts in California. That was huge,” says Hopping. “I knew there had been
a real shift in the confidence and attitudes of teachers when they sat in on a meeting of a Professional Learning Community. Within about ten minutes, instead of sitting on the outside observing, Coalinga teachers began to pull their chairs up and jump into the conversation, asking questions and actively participating.”

Hopping adds: “Now there’s a pervasive attitude among Coaling teachers: ‘if we’re good enough, we can help our students succeed.’”

McEwin observes that teachers at Hamlet Middle “understand that poverty is a challenge. But they don’t see it as an excuse for themselves or their students. They just keep asking: ‘what are the next steps for us to get better?’”

**Risk encouraged: “We failed so badly we still laugh about it”**

A vexing dilemma for low-performing schools is that they have been publicly labeled a failed school. Media and public policy have increasingly, almost exclusively, laid that “failure” at the feet of teachers. Never mind that low-performing schools almost universally lack many standard teaching resources; their physical facilities are often in poor repair; and they have high concentrations of students with big obstacles and few out-of-school extras to boost measured achievement.

“The first thing in a low-performing school is to blame teachers: you’re not doing enough. That’s the message of NCLB and turnaround,” says Greiten. “But that blame doesn’t help anyone. There’s a lot of fear and learned helplessness. Teachers can’t be vulnerable in that kind of environment.”

The dilemma is that things cannot change if the school and its teachers do not feel free to take risks and try new approaches. Willingness to experiment and fail, indeed repeated failure, is part-and-parcel of creativity and almost every significant innovation.

“It all goes back to establishing trust,” says Butler, describing why it is essential to establish an environment that is safe for teachers to try new things.

Teaming, shared leadership, and focused use of the STW rubric all help establish trust by building relationships and supporting communication and collaboration.

These structures were working well at Hamlet and helping at Coalinga but more was needed to get past Coalinga’s lingering environment of distrust and alienation. So during her first year as principal Greiten not only met regularly with each team, she established a weekly 25-minute meeting with each teacher individually. “We scheduled the meetings while the students were in p.e.,” she explains. “Every teacher meeting started with the question: what do your kids need?”

That question focused the conversation on students and it clearly communicated that Greiten was there to support teachers. If a teacher was having a problem with a student, Greiten called the student out of p.e. to meet with her and the teacher. “I would bring the student in and we’d say: ‘You want to be a good student, what’s going on that this is happening?’ or ‘You don’t want to be the kind of person that is behaving this way. What would it take for you to live up to who you are?’”

The upshot was that the conversation often got to the bottom of a student issue and teachers felt very supported. “No one had helped the teachers address their challenges,” Greiten says. “So this was very validating to them. Sometimes they didn’t want to leave the office.”

Hopping says Greiten “was religious” about keeping the meetings with teachers. “By doing those meetings she communicated that teachers are the most important thing in school and it’s up to them to make the school succeed. But it also made clear they weren’t in it alone.”

Greiten says she told teachers, “not all problems have solutions, but we’re here to move forward together.” The conversations naturally moved to data, then to assessment. “Once teachers realized they would be supported, they felt comfortable saying what they didn’t know and where they were having trouble. We never said: ‘you don’t know…’ Teachers shut down just like kids do. Instead we said: ‘we’re going to help make it easier.’”

Now, Greiten and Hopping agree, teachers can’t wait to show off what they’re doing, “They want a witness,” says Greiten. “It’s a jumping off place for taking risks.”

Butler says that the rubric and collaborative planning helped Hamlet know “how to build on what we were doing well and target what we wanted to work on.” That emphasis shifted attention off the negative labels. “We’re not trying to please anyone else; we’re trying to get better in ways that work for us. We tell people to be risk takers,” he adds. “We don’t care if you fail, but try.”

Part of building a culture of trust at Hamlet, Butler explains was “convincing kids we believe in them.” The school focused on student life and academic engagement. They implemented a no-zeroes policy, meaning that students have
to keep revising and improving their work until it passes muster. Behavior improved. Student scores went up. “That gives teachers a lot of confidence and helps everyone be more willing to try things. And we always go back to the rubric,” Butler says.

McEwin says his observations at Hamlet confirm the changes. “Jim and the teachers are very open. There’s a strong atmosphere of trust and teamwork. Jim has confidence in his teachers to try new things, and they know if they try something that doesn’t work it won’t be held against them.”

Hopping says that Greiten turns mistakes and failures into opportunities to laugh and learn. Within a well-established culture of support it’s easier for teachers to talk about what they need to change.

“If we try something and it doesn’t work, we’ll have a good laugh and then think about how to improve,” says Greiten. “We don’t have to be someone we’re not as long as we’re working and getting better as a team.”

Greiten stands by her word. This year the school’s Data Leadership Team and a group of content teachers led a school-wide pilot related to assessment and changing practice based on data. “We failed so badly we still laugh about it,” she says. “We were able to fix the problem and begin again.”

**Community and parents: “Convincing families the school appreciates their children”**

The STW rubric includes several criteria to connect the school to families and the broader community. For example: *Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world. And Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers, they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school.”*

Family and community involvement can pose a particular challenge in rural places where families may live a long way from the school. If families have a history of school interactions that are negative, the challenges are more severe.

McEwin says that relations between the school and community were not so positive in Hamlet before the processes of the School Transformation Network were implemented. But that’s changed now. “There’s a pervasive sense of success in the community,” he says.

Several things account for the change. For one, Hamlet Middle implemented student-led parent-teacher conferences. Now students must not only take responsibility for their own work and behavior at school, they must help mediate conversations about their work and their futures between their families and their teachers.

Butler says that instituting student-led conferences signaled a serious change in the relationship between the school and families. “The PTO program as it was traditionally set up just didn’t work very well for us,” he explains. Getting families into the school for meetings that were really about their own children made a huge difference. The school also started a volunteer program and a parent curriculum.

Significantly, Hamlet’s focus on student life has gone a long way toward convincing parents that the school cares about and appreciates their children. For example, the school recognizes each child’s birthday with a book, engages students in work which the students see as valuable, holds appreciation days for bus drivers and other staff, and celebrates student successes. McEwin reports that in his interviews with students, one seventh-grade girl volunteered this encouraging observation: “there are no wallflowers at Hamlet.” As a result of all the strong student and family emphasis, the school has reduced disciplinary suspensions by 75%. “Academics are not isolated from student life or from family and community involvement,” McEwin says. “It’s all pretty seamless at Hamlet.”

Recognizing student success has been a huge factor at Coalinga as well. Before beginning the STW process, there had been very little involvement from parents, little to engage them.

“We decided to have an awards program. There had never been one,” says Greiten. “We recognized all kinds of student achievement, including those students who progressed a level in the English Language program. We didn’t expect parents to show up, but almost everyone came. They were so appreciative that their children were being recognized.” Greiten says that the positive recognition for their children gives families more confidence to participate in school activities.

**Culture and climate: “It’s so healthy, the scores will follow”**

The improvements in school culture and climate that result
from the focus on healthy relationships have produced a variety of positive outcomes at Hamlet and Coalinga.

Hopping says that teachers at Coalinga are feeling good about their work and take pride in it. “They are getting recognition. They’re doing it. They are turning around their school. They started with so little and they’ve come so far. Their attitude is ‘if we can do it, you can, too.’”

Greiten says that even if Coalinga does not make Safe Harbor again this year she’s not worried. “As long as we’re improving and being ourselves, we don’t have to be on a timeline. We’re changing lives — kids’ lives, parents, teachers, our community. The culture is so entrenched and healthy that the scores will follow.”

Both schools have experienced very little teacher turnover. “This is a process teachers are in charge of, explains Butler. “Our teachers want to stay at this school; they’re excited about what they are going to do next. They’re thinking about how they can help other schools.”

That’s something Hamlet Middle will be able to do. This year they were named a Schools to Watch school. That means, among other things, that Hamlet teachers will be working with teachers in other schools who are beginning the STW process and hosting groups of visitors who want to learn from their experiences and approaches.

The healthy culture that the STW process develops usually persists. Hopping says that once a school attains STW status, the faculty “owns the school.” If a new administrator arrives, she finds herself on a journey with the faculty. “Once a school becomes a School to Watch,” she says, “they tend to stay a School to Watch.”

**Summing it up: “This helps you get where you want to be”**

“This model works because it’s about strengthening best practices, not about bringing in a lot of outside resources,” says Hopping.

“We had been through a lot of reform models before,” says Greiten. “They had all asked school staff to come up with a vision and a statement of who we were. We couldn’t do that well because we didn’t know who we weren’t. In this process you don’t start with an abstract vision. You start with actions and through your actions you learn who you are. Now we know who we are at Coalinga and our vision for ourselves and the students and the school is authentic because it’s ours.”

The process of developing and using best practices and generating ownership simultaneously makes the process amenable to many different school circumstances and generates a variety of approaches. For example, Hamlet Middle School chose to spend their first year strengthening Professional Learning Communities, planning, and integrating technology. Coalinga spent their first year organizing teams and building relationships between Coach Hopping and staff.

In Year Two, Hamlet focused on student life and parental involvement. Coalinga spent their second year building trust and strengthening relationships within the school. Hamlet was in position to begin focusing on instruction early on. Coalinga needed more time to improve the school’s culture; they began to ramp up their instructional focus in Year Three. Despite their different paths, both schools are on trajectories toward lasting success.

Both principals say the striking improvements in student outcomes have been accomplished through the power of collaboration and trust. Butler references his proofreader analogy. “Through all the ways we’ve built collaboration we have created news sets of proofreaders. Everyone in school can look at what we’re doing and think about how to make it better.”

Greiten puts it this way: “There’s no way one person can take something so broken and turn it into something so good. It’s taken everyone.”

Both schools have had strong support from their districts, their state’s middle school association, and their state’s Schools to Watch Network.

All four middle schools in Richmond County, North Carolina are participating in the STW: School Transformation Network with i3 grant support. Butler says the original idea to involve Richmond County Schools with the STW initiative
began with district leadership, especially Dr. George Norris, Superintendent, who saw the potential of the process to change school culture. “LEA leadership has been very supportive of our efforts. They have been encouraging about making Hamlet Middle School an example of how reforms do not have to be driven by budgets and canned programs but by the hard work and high expectations of great faculty.”

As part of the district’s process, the county’s middle schools meet regularly and share ideas and compare notes. “The rubric gives us a common language for our work even as each school is approaching it a little differently,” he says.

At Coalinga, Associate Superintendent Joe Casarez and Superintendent Roger Campbell have provided “unyielding” support, says Greiten, including a vision for Professional Learning Communities, the district’s English Learner Development focus, and Data Team implementation. Hopping says that district administrators have become very familiar with the STW rubric and the vision of the National Forum and have helped make certain all district staff and the school board understand the process and the goals of the i3 grant. They have supported Greiten “to step outside the box and do what needs to be done.”

Greiten says the California League of Middle Schools, under the direction of Peter Murphy and Aneta Murphy, and the state’s Schools to Watch program, directed by Irvin Howard “have been invaluable in supporting Coalinga Middle through the process and in making the grant possible.”

Both organizations and individuals have important roles to play. “School reform is about building a team and a shared vision within a school, within a district community, and within the larger state community of educational professionals,” says Greiten. “Together with the full commitment and support of our District, our CLMS leadership, our teachers, and our community, this reform is possible.”

That support and engagement has changed the experience of teachers. “Teachers no longer feel held to expectations they can’t meet,” says Greiten. “Instead they are setting expectations for themselves and for students that are beyond anything they had thought was possible.”

Earlier this month as the school year was winding down, a teacher dropped by Greiten’s office to thank her. “It’s so nice to work at a real school,” the teacher said.

And Greiten’s response? “To be a part of this is so rewarding. I can’t believe I get to work with such amazing people.”

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