

Montana Frontier Schools: District Challenges and School Sustainability Practices

By

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PRESENTATION FOCUS

- ☹ Frontier Schools Project
- ☹ Frontier School District Defined
- ☹ Study Procedures
- ☹ Results & Conclusions

MSSA Frontier Schools Project

Who is the **Montana Small Schools Alliance (MSSA)**?

Created in 1996, the Montana Small Schools Alliance is a not-for-profit organization with a purpose to provide professional development, research, resources, and technical assistance to help Montana's small schools meet state and federal mandates in educationally sound ways.

MSSA Frontier Schools Project

Why initiate a “Frontier Schools” research project?

To identify the school district practices and contributing community characteristics that make these very small “frontier” schools successful and sustainable.

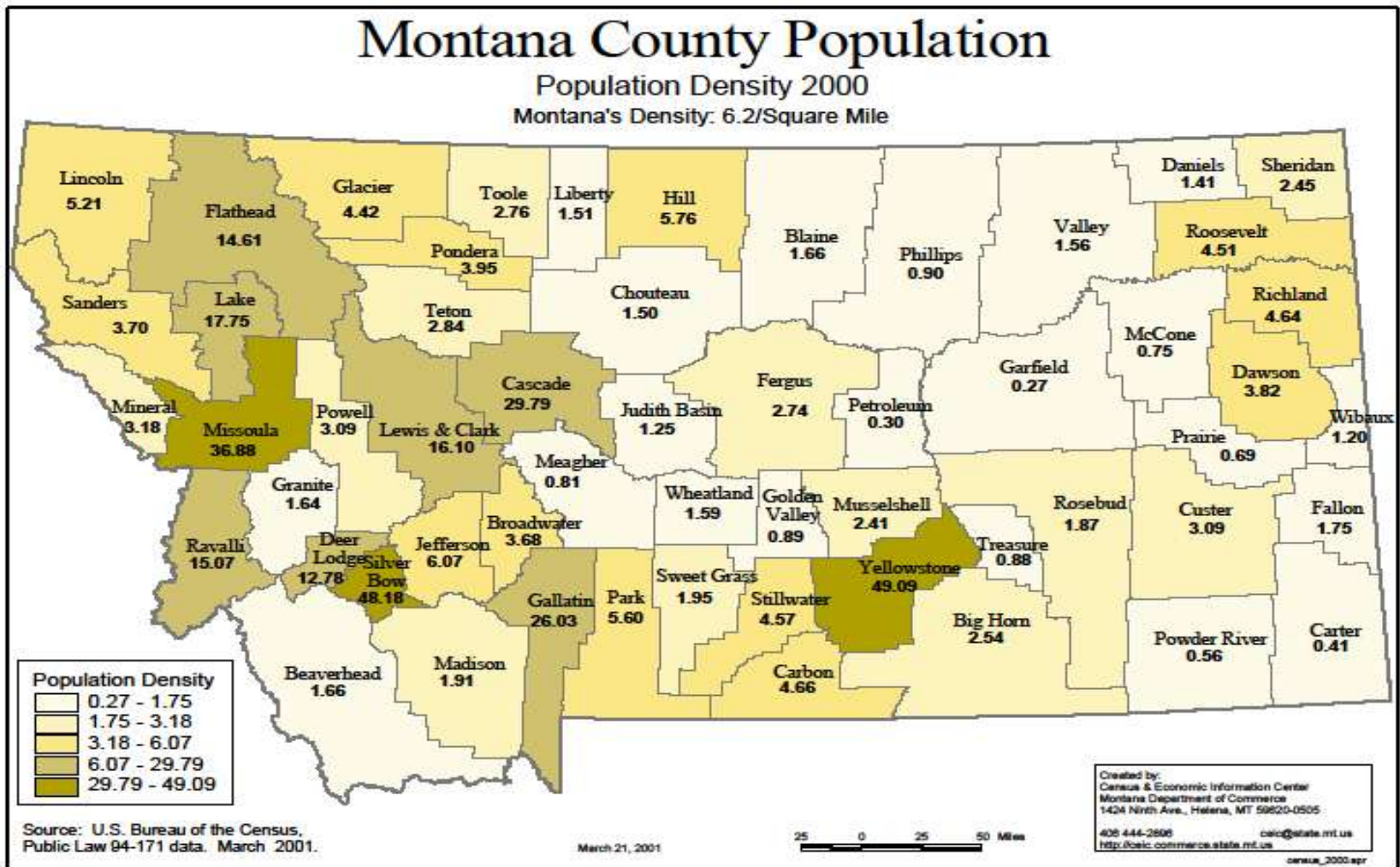
MSSA Frontier Schools Defined

A Montana “frontier school” is defined as a school district with 200 or fewer students and its attendant community located in a county with 5 or fewer people per square mile.

42 of the 56 Montana counties have 5 or fewer people per square mile.

209 Montana school districts enrolled 200 or fewer students in 2008.

MSSA Frontier Schools Defined



MSSA Frontier Schools Study

Phase One:

Purpose: To ascertain the perceptions of MSSA workshop participants regarding the most important challenges confronting small, rural “frontier” schools in Montana and the practices that are perceived to be contributing to their sustainability.

Funded By: ORO y Plata Foundation

Phase One Study Procedures

- Population: participants in Feb. & March, 2009 MSSA workshops
- Survey: 20 items in 3 parts: Demographics, Challenges, Sustainability Practices
- Pilot test: in 4 school districts
- Administration: paper-pencil
- Analysis: Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS); 97 surveys returned
- Reliability: .815 sustainability scale (8 reasons)

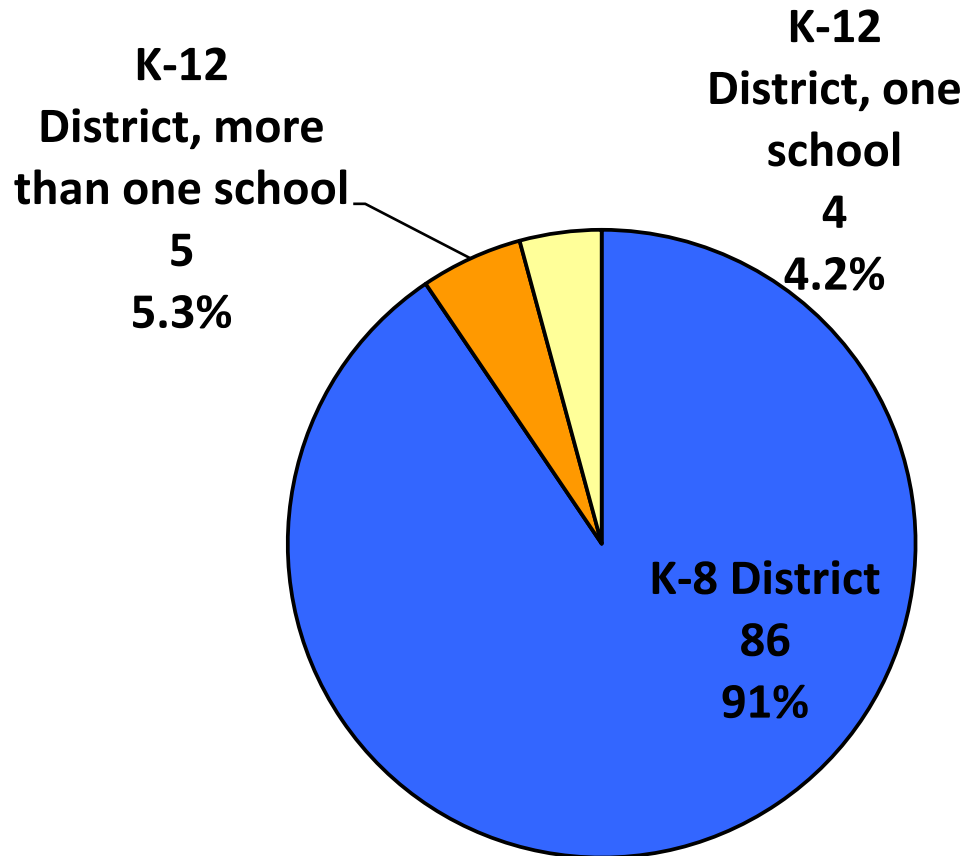
Phase One Study: Results

Respondent's Primary Position of Responsibility in the School District

Position	No.	Percent
County Superintendent	15	16.3
District Superintendent and School Principal	3	3.3
District Supervising Teacher	25	27.1
District School Board Chair	1	1.1
Teacher	46	50.0
Clerk	2	2.2
Total	92	100.0

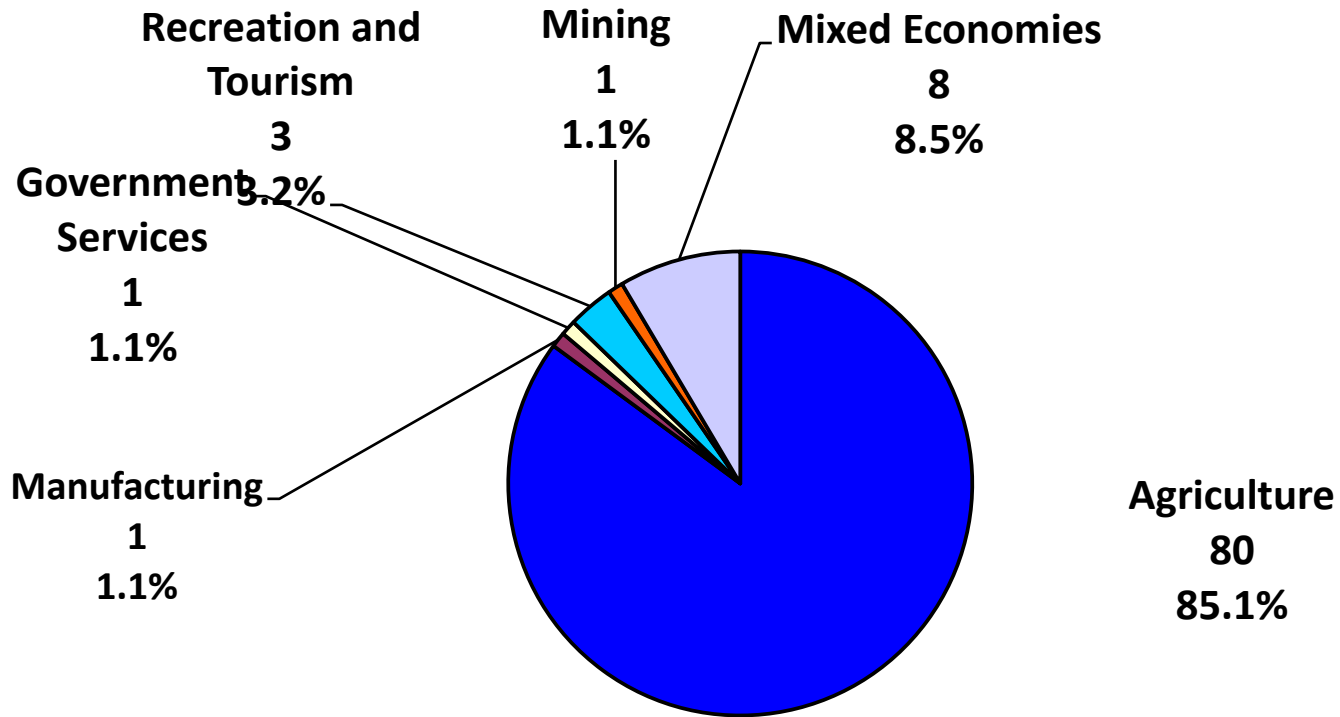
Phase One Study: Results

Respondent by Type of School District



Phase One Study: Results

Most Prevalent Type of Economic Base in School District



Phase One Study: Results

Student Enrollment in Respondent Districts

Students Enrolled	No.	Percent
Less than 10	32	33.3
11-20	34	35.4
21-30	7	7.3
31-40	6	6.3
41-50	1	1.0
51-75	7	7.3
76-100	3	3.1
101- 125	0	0
126-150	0	0
151-175	0	0
176-200	2	2.1
more than 200	4	4.2
Total	96	100.0

One-third of the 96 respondents indicated less than 10 students were enrolled in their school district. Approximately 82% of the respondents worked in school districts with 40 or fewer students enrolled.

Phase One Study: Results

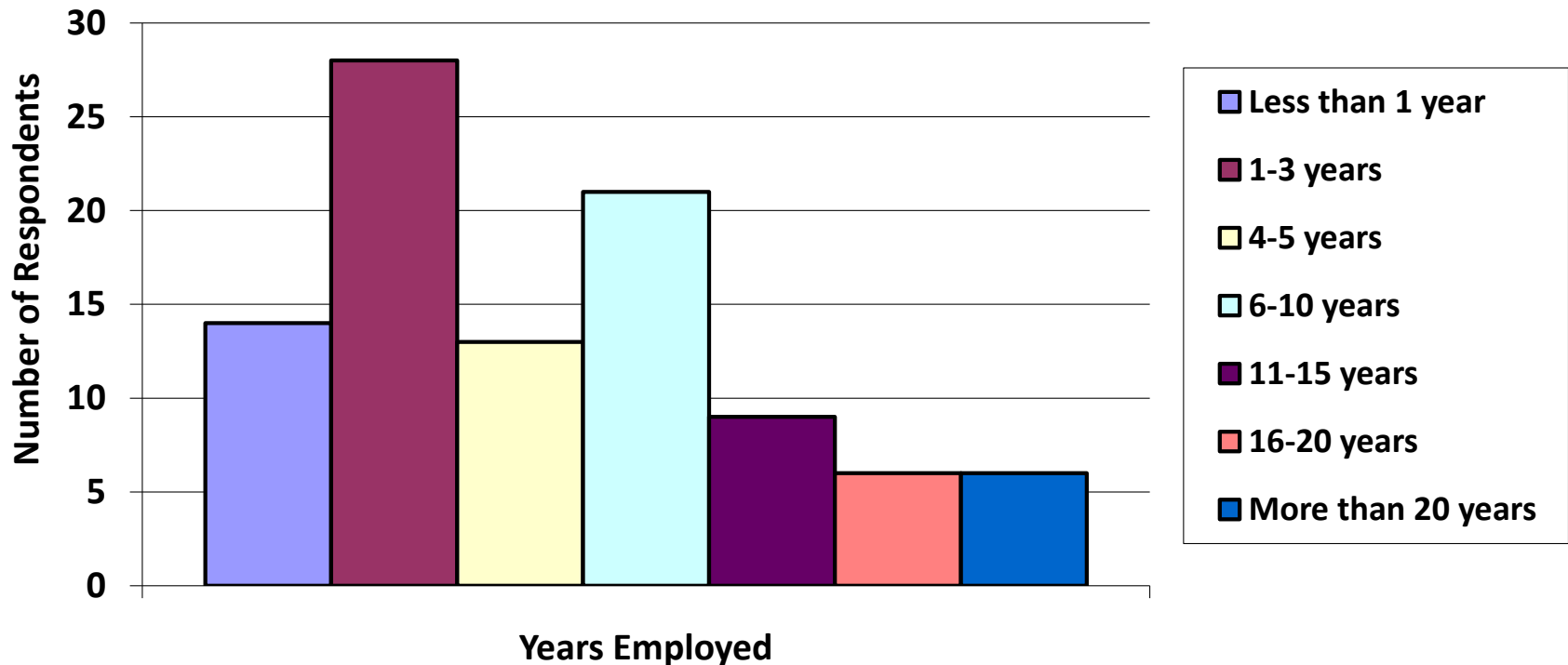
Students Eligible for District Free and Reduced Lunch Program

Free and Reduced Price Lunch Students	No.	%
None	24	32.4
1-10%	7	9.5
11-20%	4	5.4
21-30%	3	4.1
31-40%	6	8.1
41-50%	8	10.8
More than 50%	22	29.7
Total	74	100.0

Approximately 30 percent of respondent districts had more than 50 percent of students eligible for free and or reduced price lunch program.

Phase One Study: Results

Respondent Years of Employment in Current Position



Over one-fourth (28.9%) has been employed in their current position between one and three years; another 14.4% employed less than 1 year. Thus, 43.3% with 3 years or less employment in position.

Phase One Study: Results

Respondent's Highest Level of Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	No.	Percent
Bachelor's degree	43	46.2
Graduate study but less than Master's degree	29	31.2
Master's degree	14	15.1
Graduate study beyond Master's degree but less than Doctorate	6	6.5
Doctorate	1	1.1
Total	93	100.0

Phase One Study: Results

Montana Institution Where Respondent Received Bachelor's Degree

Institution	No.	Percent
University of Montana	11	16.9
Montana State University-Billings	12	18.5
Montana State University	13	20.0
Montana State University-Northern	9	13.9
University of Montana-Western	13	20.0
Carroll College	6	9.2
Rocky Mountain College	1	1.5
Totals	65	100

Sixty-five or over two-thirds (69.9%) of the 93 respondents received their Bachelor's degree from an institution of higher education located in Montana.

Phase One Study: Results

Workshop participants were asked to indicate if a challenge was a pressing issue for the district at the current time. Challenges noted by the highest percentage of respondents was

- low student enrollment (n=59, 60.8%),
- unrealistic federal regulations (n=48, 49.5%),
- inadequate financial resources (n=47, 48.5%),
- mixed grade levels of students in classroom (n=38, 39.2%), and
- difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s) (n=32, 33%).

Phase One Study: Results

General Operations Practices Contributing to School Sustainability

General Operations Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a. Operated a 4-day per week school schedule	15	15.6	81	84.4	96	100.0
b. Operated mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms	87	89.7	10	10.3	97	100.0
c. Operated school facilities to also serve community functions	41	42.3	56	57.7	97	100.0
d. Other	9	9.3	88	90.7	97	100.0

Phase One Study: Results

Staffing practices noted by highest percentage of respondents that have contributed to school sustainability in districts:

“Made available special in-service opportunities”
(n=49, 50.5%);

“Promoted reputation of school” (n=31, 32%)’

“Employed teacher(s) with multiple endorsements”
(n=27, 28.1%);

“Created partnerships with other districts”
(n=26, 26.8%);, and

“Passed local levy” (n=25, 25.8%).

Interestingly, only two of the 97 respondents selected the practice “Recruited teachers more aggressively from selected colleges” and only one respondent selected “Offered teacher induction program.”

Phase One Study: Results

Fiscal practices noted by highest percentage of respondents that have contributed to school sustainability in districts:

“Sought bids and comparison pricing for all purchases”
(n=45, 46.9%);

“Paid all bills promptly where discounts are involved”
(n=44, 45.4%);

“Formed consortium of school districts to leverage resources”
(n=43, 44.3%);

“Increased student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten)”
(n=43, 44.3%);

“Cooperated with other districts for specialized personnel”
(n=42, 43.3%); and

“Hired teachers on low end of district pay scale”
(n=40, 41.2%).

Phase One Study: Results

Distance learning technology practices noted by highest percentage of respondents that have contributed to school sustainability in districts:

“Delivered professional development opportunities for teachers” (n=46, 47.4%);

“Provided enrichment experiences for students” (n=45, 46.4%);

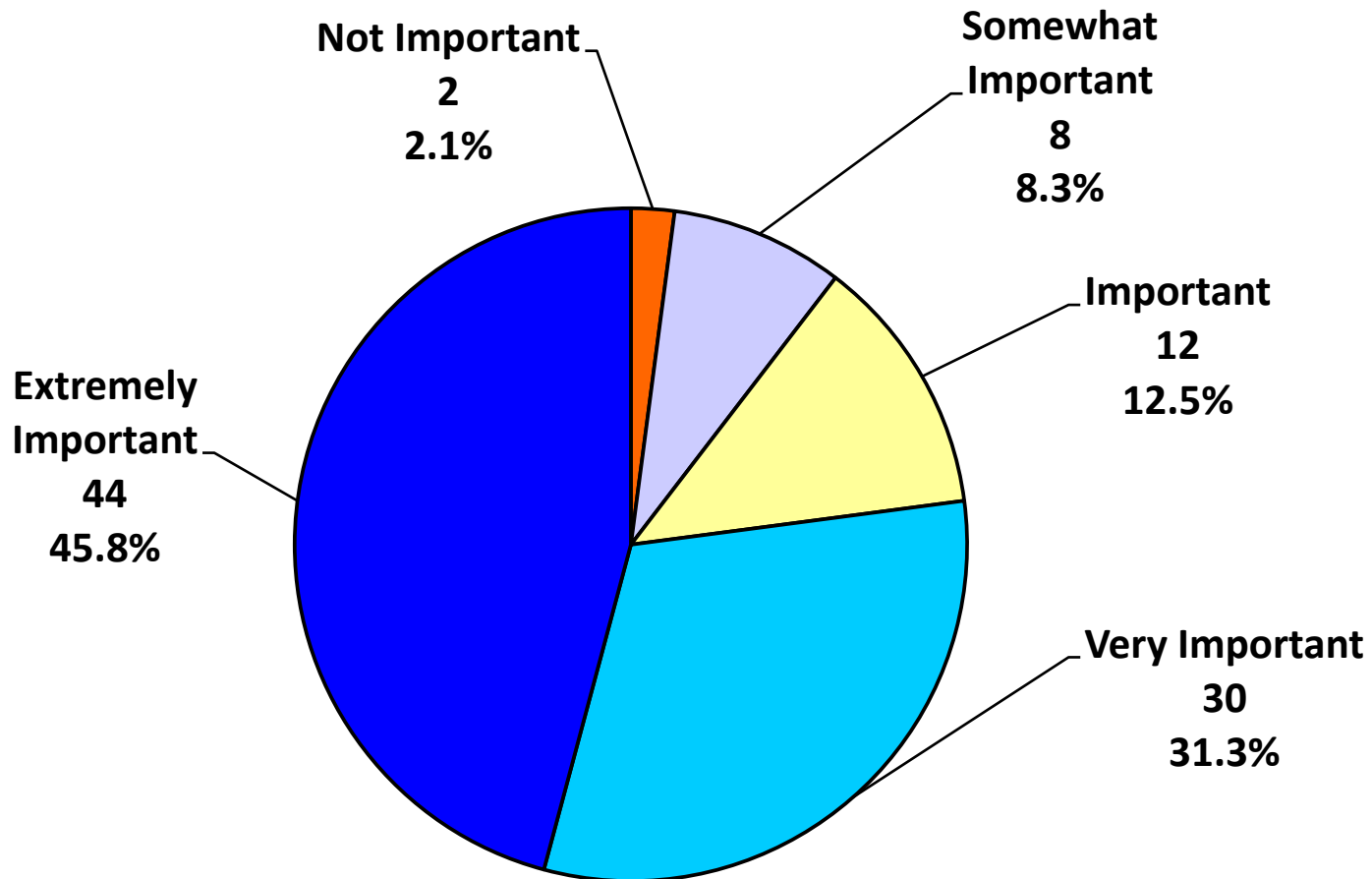
“Offered school board training” (n=17, 17.5%);

“Offered courses to meet state-mandated curriculum requirements” (n=16, 16.5%);

“Provided citizens access to Internet” (n=15, 15.5%); and
“Delivered professional development opportunities for administrators” (n=14, 14.4%).

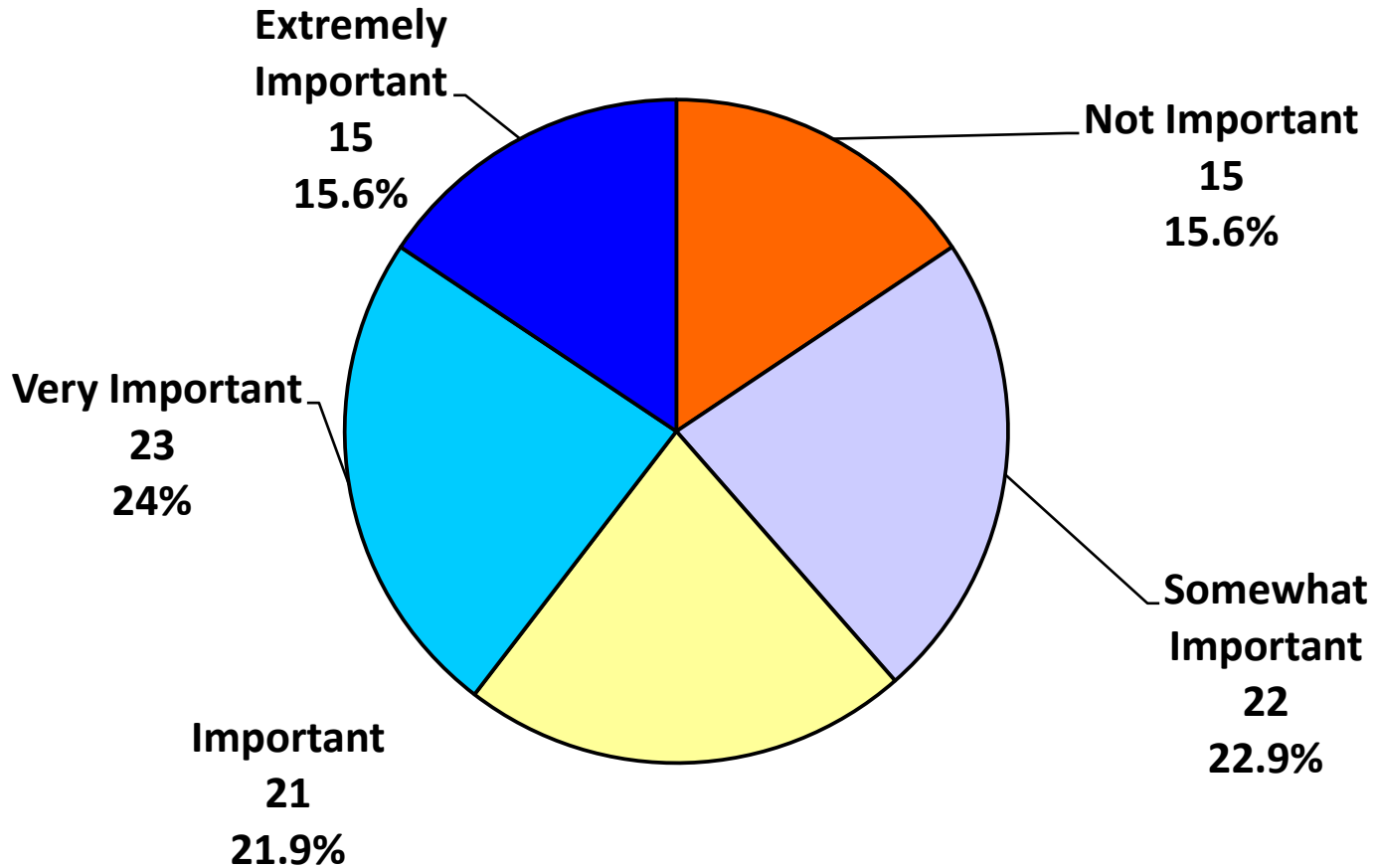
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Educate Children and/or Youth of Community



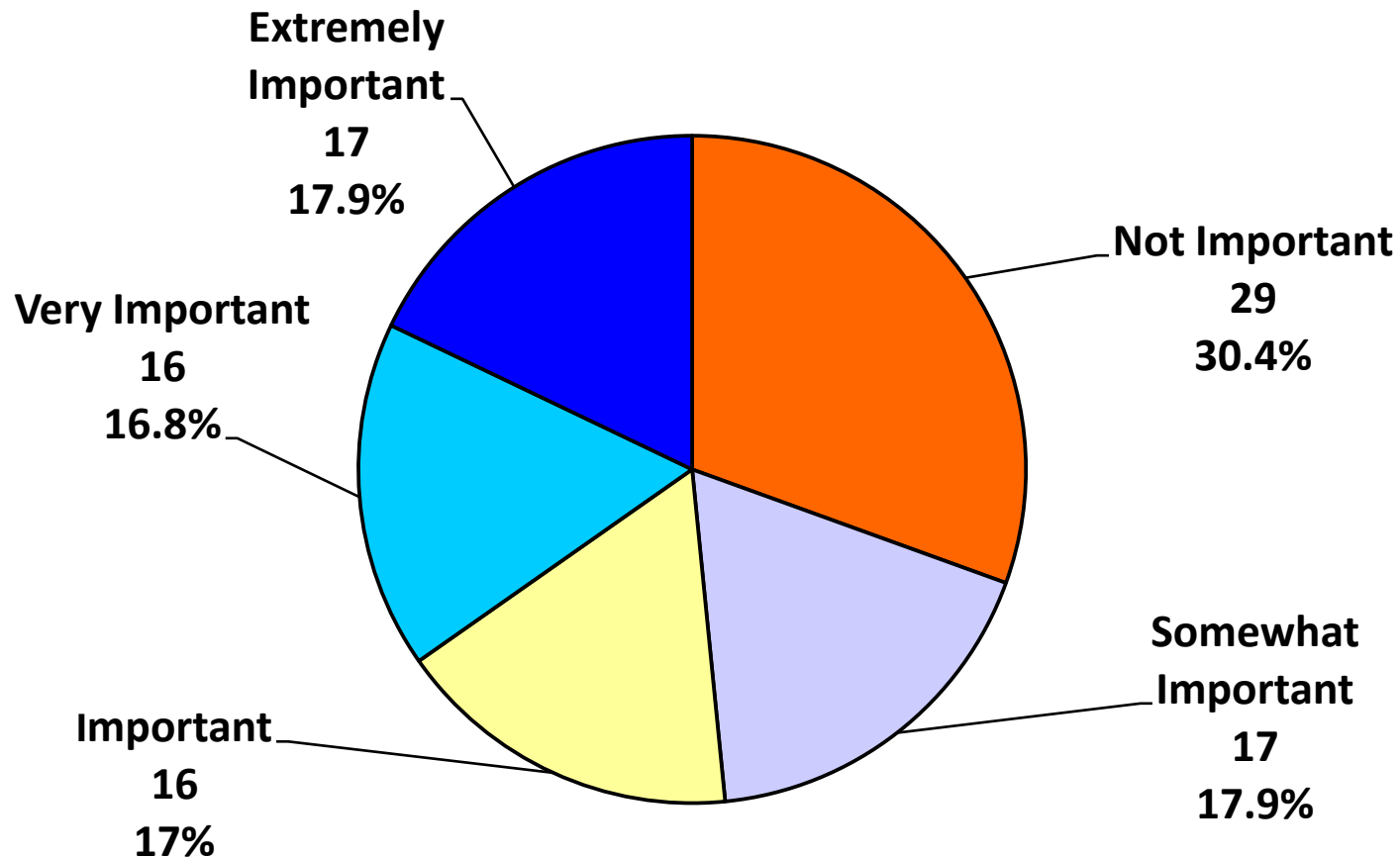
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Meet Community Development Functions or Needs



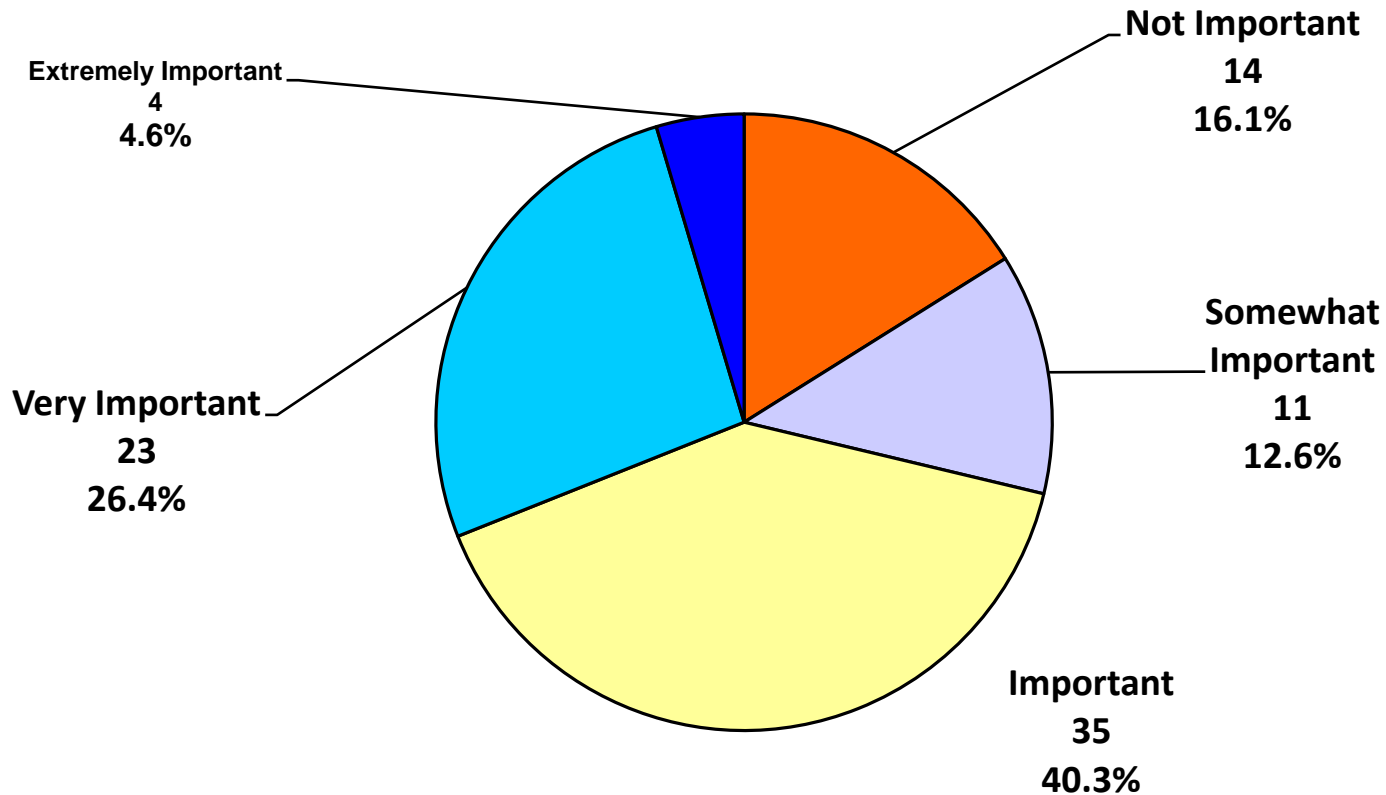
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Travel Distance Too Far to School Out of District



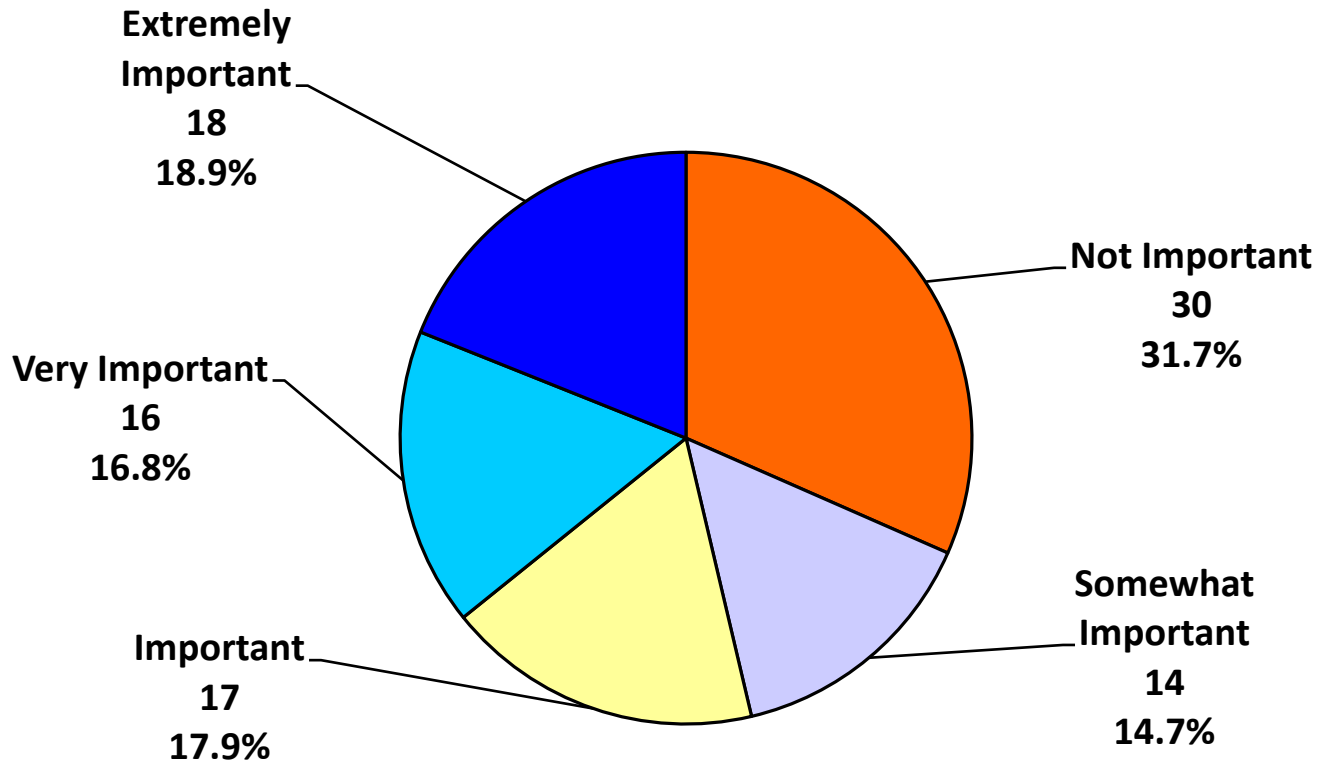
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: School Operating Expenditures Basically Same as Neighboring Districts



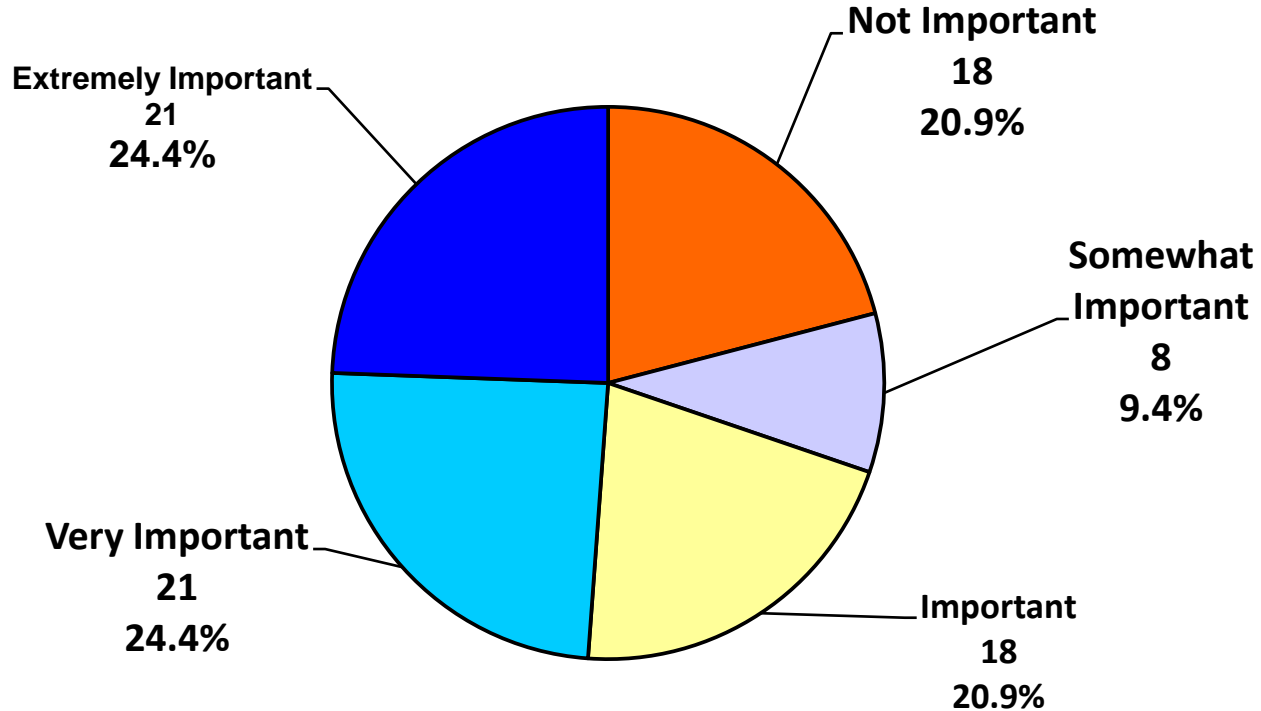
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Geography and Road Conditions Safer



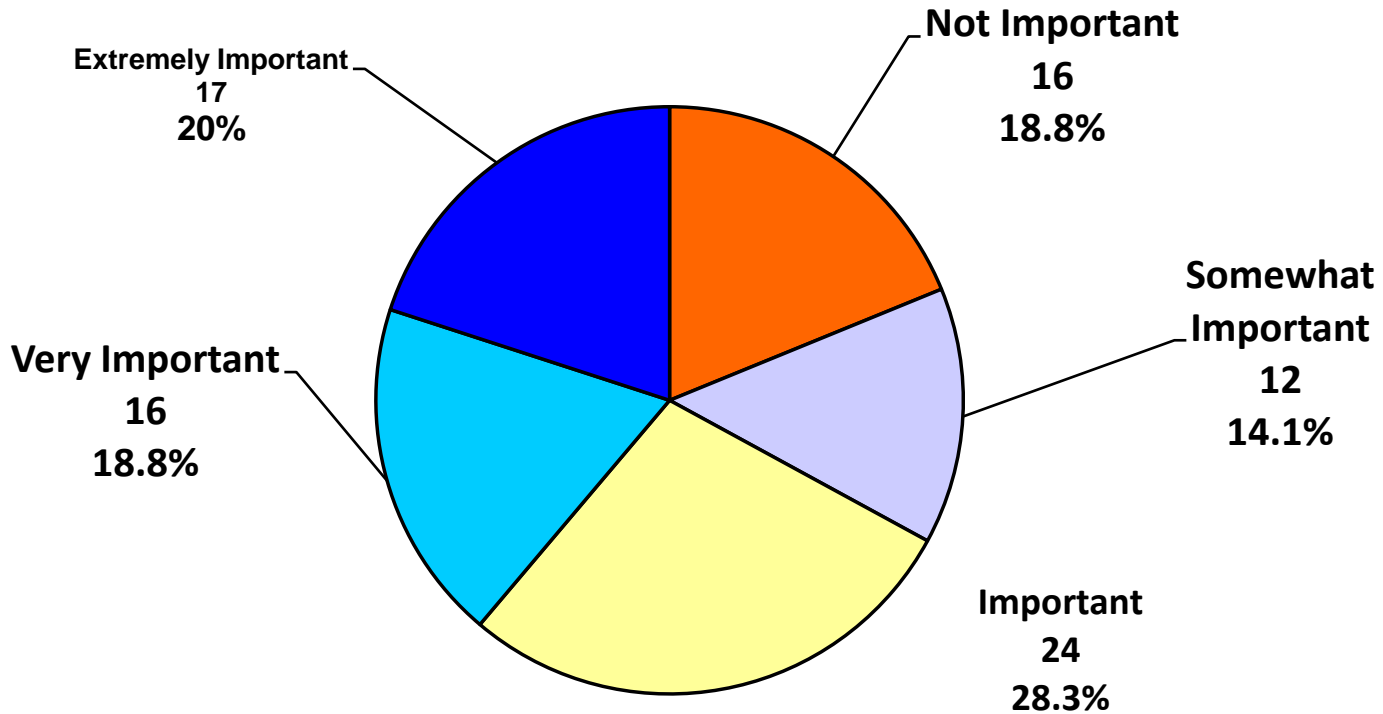
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Lack of Opposition in the District to Closing School



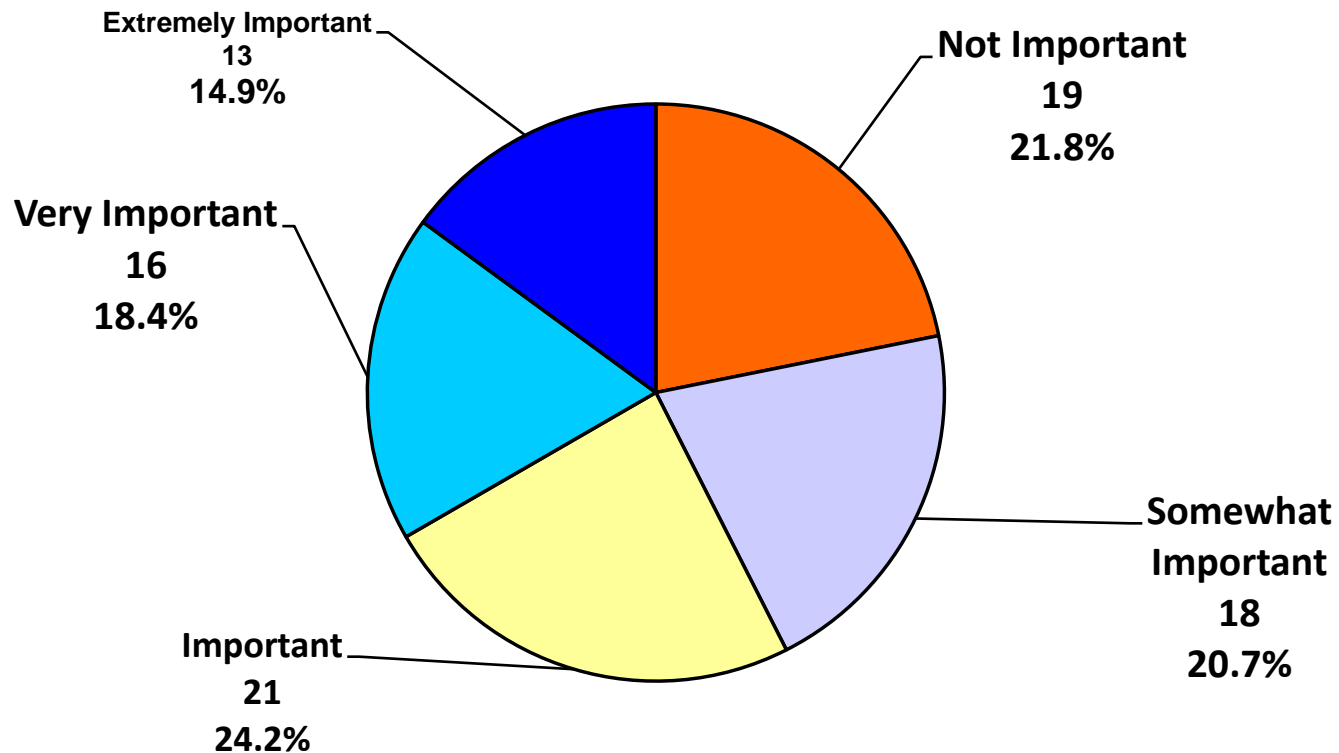
Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Lack of External Pressure (Outside of District) to Close School



Phase One Study: Results

Sustainability Reason: Key Politicians in Area Strongly Support the School



Phase One Study: Results

Names of School Advocates?

63 respondents provided the name of at least one community member *not* employed by the school district who has been a strong advocate for the school and its value to the community or area the school serves. (Note: Most provided 2 names of school advocates in community.)

Phase One Study: Conclusions

1. Workshop participants in “Frontier Schools” are employed primarily in K-8 elementary school districts.
2. Majority of workshop participants have been employed five or less years in their current position.
3. Bachelor’s degree is the highest degree held by most workshop participants, with less than one in seven participants holding a Master’s degree.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

4. Montana institutions of higher education produce the vast majority of educators who attend MSSA workshops and work in Frontier schools.
5. Frontier school districts of the workshop participants have small student enrollments, with one-third enrolling less than 10 students, and four in 10 districts enrolling 40 or fewer students.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

6. Frontier school districts of workshop participants may include a substantial portion of impoverished students, as four in 10 districts have more than 40 percent of students eligible for the free and reduced price lunch program.
7. Majority of MSSA workshop participants are from school districts located in the Four Rivers and South East regions of the Montana Association of School Superintendents.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

8. Agriculture is the most prevalent economic base in the vast majority of Frontier school districts where workshop participants are employed. Less than one in 10 workshop participants are employed where the district serves a rural area with “mixed economies.”
9. Top five major challenges (most pressing issues) in Frontier school districts of participants in the Montana Small Schools Alliance workshops are low student enrollment, unrealistic federal regulations, inadequate financial resources, mixed grade levels of students in classroom, and difficulty recruiting qualified teacher(s).

Phase One Study: Conclusions

10. Few workshop participants in Frontier schools, comprised primarily of K-8 elementary school districts, note student use of illegal drugs, student use of alcohol, inadequate curriculum/course offerings, or meeting teacher certification requirements as major challenges or pressing issues in their school districts.
11. Workshop participants from Frontier school districts explain low student enrollment as a trend with major consequences. Their concerns are expressed in statements such as:

“Enrollment has dropped over the years.” “As students graduate, we only have one (student) or so trickling in--so enrollment is dropping.” “If enrollment becomes too low will good teachers be laid off? Eventually will school be closed?” “Low student enrollment leads to low funding and threat of consolidation/closure.” “Our enrollment has been dropping these past few years, and this year we lose our largest number when the 8th grade graduates. We have few children coming up--only one pre-school and no kindergarten. We have to cut back on staff.”

Phase One Study: Conclusions

12. Workshop participants from Frontier school districts explain “inadequate financial resources” to have enormous impact on them and students, with statements such as:

“I would like to see more equipment, more field trips, and more resources for our students. Pay for teachers so they can stay would help.” “Our school (like many rural schools) is constantly struggling financially, which leads to higher teacher turnover rates (teachers leave for better pay).” “The school needs to update/fix physical issues at the school but cannot fund them.” “We never have enough money to provide the proper education materials.” “Teacher pay is really low but schools can't squeeze anymore pennies for them.” “Money is based on ANB and land taxes.”

Phase One Study: Conclusions

13. “Mixed grade levels of students in the classroom” presents workshop participants in the Frontier school districts with special issues, as illustrated in the following statements:

“Federal requirements are not specifically applicable to my student population from year to year.” “Teachers and staff expected to “know it all” by counselors, nurses, etc.” “With the funding being so low, we can't keep up with changes in textbooks for grades. We haven't the money to buy updates and new technology.”

Phase One Study: Conclusions

14. "Unrealistic federal expectations" is a major issue for MSSA workshop participants who work in the Frontier school districts, as illustrated by the following statements:

"Can't spend the money where we need to." "Our school lost our title program because of the last Census; the mine that supports our community is closing its doors." "Our school's members are getting smaller, students are going to neighboring schools earlier and that larger school is trying to consolidate." "A neighboring district is eager for our enrollment numbers. There is pressure to consolidate from outside the community."

Phase One Study: Conclusions

15. As a general sustainability practice, frontier schools of workshop participants operate mixed-age or multi-grade classrooms and operate school facilities to also serve community functions.
16. Staffing practices of Frontier schools in which workshop participants work that contribute to school sustainability include making special in-service opportunities available, promoting the reputation of the school, employing teacher(s) with multiple endorsements, creating partnerships with other districts, and passing a local levy. Only two of the 97 respondents selected the practice "Recruited teachers more aggressively from selected colleges" and only one respondent selected "Offered teacher induction program" as staffing practices used by their district to contribute to school sustainability.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

17. Fiscal practices of Frontier schools in which workshop participants work that contribute to school sustainability include seeking bids and comparison pricing for all purchases, paying all bills promptly where discounts are involved, forming a consortium of school districts to leverage resources, increasing student count (e.g., all-day kindergarten), and passing a local levy.
18. Distance learning technology practices primarily used by Frontier schools in which workshop participants work that contribute to school sustainability include delivering professional development opportunities for teachers and providing enrichment experiences for students.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

- 19.** Importance of school to the community in educating children and/or youth is the primary reason that has been the most important consideration for sustaining the small rural public school(s) in the Frontier school districts of MSSA workshop participants.

Phase One Study: Conclusions

20. A vast majority of MSSA workshops participants can name community members not employed by the school district who have been strong advocates for the school and its value to the community or area the school serves.

Phase One Study Report

Download a copy of the report

Challenges and Sustainability Practices of Frontier Schools in Montana:

A Research Report at

<http://www.mtsmallschools.org/research.htm>

