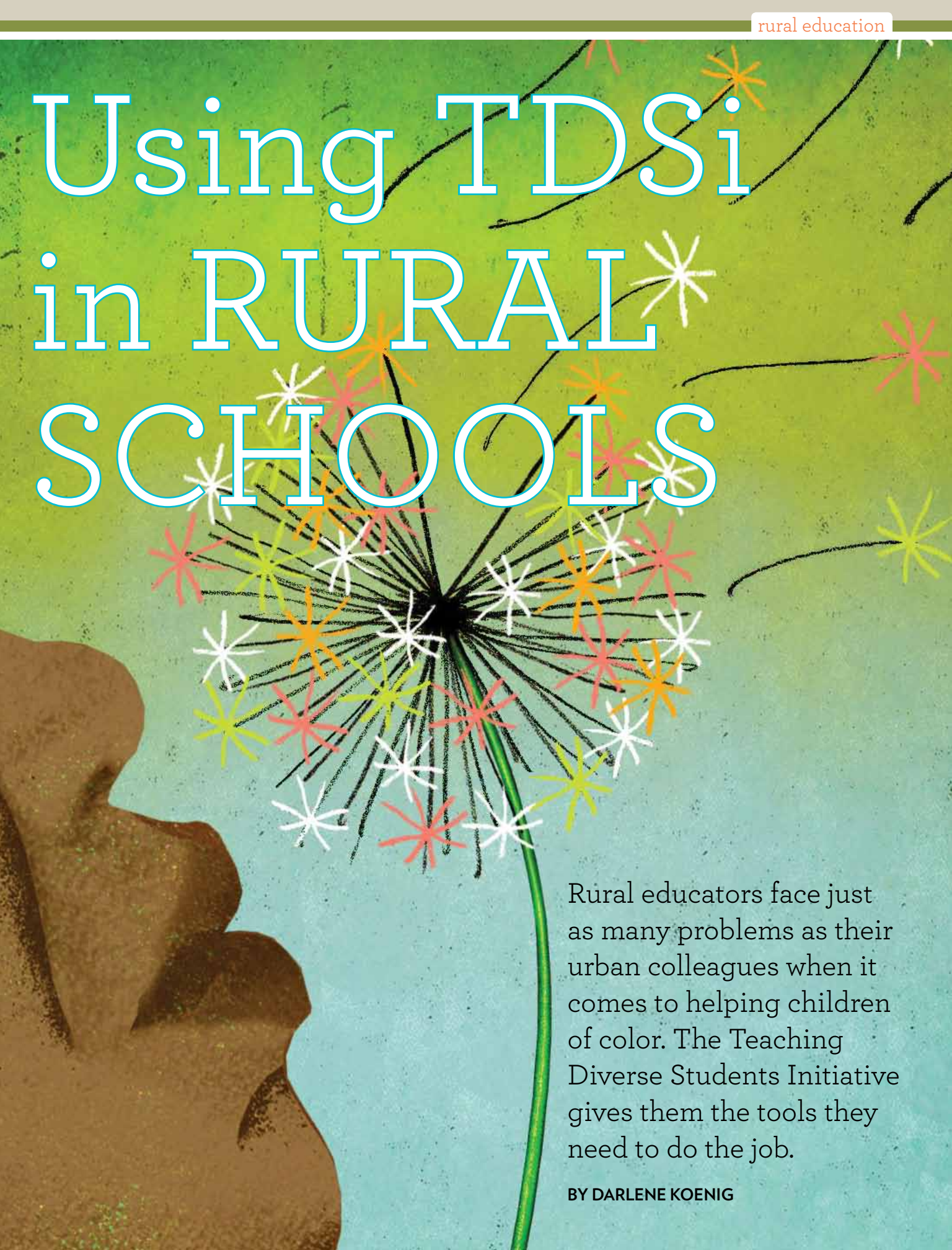


Using TDSi in RURAL SCHOOLS



Rural educators face just as many problems as their urban colleagues when it comes to helping children of color. The Teaching Diverse Students Initiative gives them the tools they need to do the job.

BY DARLENE KOENIG



Rhoda Hubbard-Anderson describes her Minnesota community as having “a split personality.” Once a sleepy spot among corn and soy bean fields, Hutchinson—like many rural areas of the nation—is changing. Latino families from Texas and Mexico are joining the German and Scandinavian descendants that have farmed there for generations.

Hubbard-Anderson describes both overt and subtle discrimination toward the newcomers, a phenomenon she sees reflected daily in the school district where she teaches. Staff members leaving her building one day found pamphlets from a white supremacist group plastered to their cars.

“We had no idea this group even existed,” she says. “But as the Hispanic population grew, so did resistance.”

Another teacher of English language learners (ELL) describes high school students who have developed such negative views of themselves that they ask her, “Why would you want to work with us Mexicans?”

“The biggest thing I’ve realized is that we don’t have a system in place to fold these kids into,” Hubbard-Anderson says.

That sounds familiar to Jodi Fletcher.

Fletcher is a teacher on special assignment in curriculum instruction and assessment for Falcon School District 49 in Colorado. Serving about 12,500 students across 16 schools, the district encompasses the northeastern portion of Colorado Springs and the rural area of Falcon. A quiet ranching community that got its first major grocery store only 10 years ago, Falcon also is undergoing rapid change. It is predominantly white. Yet, the number of people of color—particularly Latino, African-American and Asian families—has increased.

Fletcher is comfortable talking about race and other cultural differences. She came to Falcon from Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. In Prince George’s, African Americans make up nearly 75 percent of its 130,000 students. Fletcher’s own children are biracial. In Falcon, she saw that there was work to do.

It wasn’t as if the district hadn’t addressed cultural differences. About 30 percent of students in the district are from military families, which Fletcher points out is “a culture of its own.” Located near several Air Force bases and the U.S. Air Force Academy, the district provides a variety of support programs for those students. But three years ago, spurred by concerns and complaints from parents, she teamed with Martina Meadows, an English as a second language (ESL) lead teacher, and positive behavior support coach Martha Clingman. Their job: Create a more welcoming environment culturally.

“We have to meet every student’s needs,” she says, citing 41 different languages spoken among the district’s students. While an inclusive school climate is essential, “we needed to go beyond the food, fun and festivals,” says Fletcher. “We needed to do some purposeful, meaningful work.”

The committee turned to the Teaching Diverse Students Initiative (TDSi).

Using TDSi

TDSi helped take the group beyond its initial efforts to merely change school and district policy. “We needed [TDSi] to start some difficult conversations about race,” Fletcher says. TDSi is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, done in partnership with the National Education Association and the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education. TDSi’s materials are all free and available at www.tolerance.org/tdsi.

The team started with TDSi’s Common Beliefs Survey, which helps identify personal beliefs about instruction and learning that might have unintended negative consequences in the classroom. They set up sessions around the district, calling them “conversations around culture.” The sessions included not just classroom teachers but every staff member who came in contact with students: administrators, technology specialists, cafeteria workers, custodians and even bus drivers.

Fletcher jokes that the team was a “three-woman wrecking crew.” But they saw barriers begin to fall.

“We were worried about the reaction,” she says. Teachers

could have seen the effort as “just one more thing on our plate.” Instead, “these sessions have been amazing”—provoking questions and conversations that some had been reticent to share.

“One teacher said to me, ‘What do I call my kids?’ And I said, ‘Call them by their names.’ The key is to first build relationships with them,” she says. Fletcher added that they will give you the cues that allow a deeper exploration of culture. And that exploration leads to richer classroom experiences for every student.

With “some tweaks,” Fletcher hopes to have students themselves take the questionnaire and apply it to their relationships with peers.

active discussion boards that encourage students to share knowledge and opinions on race and culture. For now, she also has turned to TDSi and its Common Beliefs Survey for use in her educational technology courses.

Rhodes says it has not been easy to get her students to talk about race and the importance of acknowledging it in the classroom. Students from rural areas often refuse to open up, she says, and are clearly uncomfortable with the process. She tries to ease their discomfort by emphasizing that there are “no right or wrong answers” when assessing personal beliefs—just starting points for continuing the conversation, shifting tightly held perceptions and “letting our secondary responses be different.”

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In the Wake of Katrina

Like Fletcher, Elizabeth Rhodes is also new to a rural environment. With an expertise in educational technology, she left a career at Xavier University in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Now, she’s with the Center for Educational Services and Resources at Southeastern Louisiana University.

The town of Hammond, Louisiana, lies north of New Orleans, near the junction of Interstates 12 and 55. At the 2000 census, Hammond and surrounding Tangipahoa Parish were majority white. But the devastating 2005 hurricane drove people of all races to rural areas of the region. Rhodes aims to influence future teachers—those who come from rural areas and those who teach in them. Rural areas are changing, she says, and education students must have the tools to work with a diverse group of learners effectively.

Southeastern Louisiana University’s education program mandates courses in diversity, but they are offered online. That can be efficient for students, says Rhodes, but not as effective as courses that foster conversation and interaction among students.

“Teaching is all about the person,” she says. “It’s about content, but it’s also about who you are,” what you bring to the experience and “how you react and respond to things.” Rhodes hopes that the online courses can evolve, with inter-

Rhodes also hopes to use the students’ field experience to broaden their perspectives. She encourages them to use TDSi’s School Survey when they are placed in schools in poorer, rural parishes. An important part of their education, she says, is to assess the current quality of education for the students they will teach.

Celia Hilber of Jacksonville State University in Alabama agrees. She tries to prepare new teachers for being placed in a variety of settings. Some of her students—many of them from smaller, rural communities in Alabama and northwestern Georgia—will interact with diverse populations for the first time.

Hilber says that TDSi is vital to helping with that effort. But she also emphasizes the need to recruit teachers and future teachers of color—teachers who resemble their students. Of the 25 students in her assessment class, 23 are white and female. There is one male and one African-American female.

Jodi Fletcher echoes that sentiment. She says her Colorado district needs to recruit more quality teachers from diverse backgrounds. “We’re not there yet,” she says. But with introspection on the part of existing staff, along with cultural proficiency guided with the right professional development tools, “we’re heading down a path we can be proud of.” ♦