

Rural Schools: Definite Problems and Potential Solutions

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Rural Schools in America

A single rural school represents a small number of students in a learning environment. But taken as a collective, the importance of rural education in this country becomes self-evident. During the 2002-2003 school year, 12.5 million students attended public-school in communities of fewer than 25,000 people (Scallan, 2005). This figure accounts for 27 percent of all public school students in the United States.

With more than a quarter of American students enrolled in rural schools, it is imperative that elected officials, educators, and communities do everything possible to ensure the success of these schools. Unfortunately, statistics show that rural schools are not thriving in many states, and in places such as Mississippi, Arkansas, and West Virginia, rural schools face daunting challenges unknown in suburban or urban school centers. This essay seeks to illustrate some of the more glaring problems faced by rural schools, and provides a brief list of proposed solutions to help alleviate these predicaments.

Problems

Perhaps the single greatest threat facing rural schools is not unique to schools in rural settings. Poverty is found in all corners of America, and negatively effects students in both inner cities and rural townships. The poverty that faces families in rural communities is the soil from which many harmful weeds spring up. Some of these invasive problems include low levels of education for adult family members, small teacher salaries, and long commutes caused by school consolidation.

In most cases, the parents of students who attend school in a rural setting grew up in that same rural community. If this community was poor, that meant the parent more

than likely did not receive as much formal education as a comparable parent in a more affluent area. A study performed by The Rural School Trust and Community Trust confirmed this when they found a direct correlation between states' rural poverty and the smaller percentage of rural adults with twelve or more years of education (Howell 2000). Dozens of studies have demonstrated that the level of education a parent receives is a strong predictor of the level of academic success a student is likely to achieve. If a rural community has a high rate of poverty, it follows that its adults are less educated, and their children are less likely to continue their education. This is an important way that poverty leaves all students at a disadvantage from the time of their birth.

Poor rural areas have a much smaller tax base than larger school districts, which obviously leaves them with less money to spend on improving their schools. Also, many rural communities face the problem of people moving away from the area (Lewis, 2004). Economic factors, such as the closing of businesses and plants, have a larger effect on smaller communities where workers are dependent on the few businesses that operate there. If there are only two major employers in a small town, and one of them shuts down, a large percentage of residents may be forced to withdraw their students from school mid-year. This has a detrimental effect on the student, and makes their chance of finishing high school much smaller.

Rural schools, particularly those in low income areas, have a difficult time offering teachers attractive salary and benefits packages. Without economic incentives in place to attract teachers, the best teachers will shy away from rural school districts. In states with a high percentage of rural students, including Mississippi and Arkansas, teacher salaries are among the lowest in the nation. In 1993-1994, the average rural

teaching salary in Arkansas was \$24,114, compared with the national average of \$28,655 (Howell, 2000). Even within the state of Arkansas, there was a gap of almost \$4,000 between the salaries of rural teachers and their non-rural counterparts (Howell, 2000). With greener pastures awaiting them outside the rural setting, it makes sense that teachers would flock to suburban schools that have the ability to give them large pay increases. Nationally, the average rural teacher earns only 86 percent of the average salary of a non-rural teacher (Phillips, 2003). Inevitably, this leaves rural schools with the problem of high teacher turnover rates, a lack of consistency, and the problem of continually having to find replacements for some of their best teachers.

The previous problems describing poverty-stricken rural schools could be applied similarly to poor inner-city schools as well. But there are also problems that are uniquely rural in nature. One of the most troublesome is the issue of transportation. As rural communities shrink, consolidation has been a popular method of creating larger schools meant to serve students from several rural communities. These union schools generally offer more courses, but they require students to travel further distances to attend. In some instances, students have been forced to endure commutes in excess of two hours just to attend their new school (McQueen, 2000). The additional money school districts and parents are forced to spend on transportation, exacerbated by the rising cost of fuel, channels away funds that could have been spent on teacher salaries or school technology. Thus, before even considering the negative consequences of having students spend four or more hours traveling each day, it is apparent that rural school consolidation is not without serious drawbacks.

Possible Solutions

Are rural schools in the United States beyond repair? No; but unfortunately there are few easy answers for the problems that ail them.

Although often thought of as a weakness, the greatest strength of most rural school districts is their small size (Scallan, 2005). Teachers are able to know a larger percentage of their students, and in many cases they are able to get to know families in their community better than teachers in large urban centers. Rural schools also tend to have smaller classroom sizes, which gives students greater access to teacher attention and assistance. Before rushing into any school consolidation schemes, rural schools must understand the advantages of their small size. Unlike urban schools, which in New York City and California often enroll thirty-four students in each class, rural schools do not usually have their hands similarly forced.

One way to preserve small school sizes is to increase the amount of money these school districts receive. The ability to pay teachers a wage comparable to that they would receive elsewhere would improve rural schools' ability to retain their best teachers. This would provide consistency and experience to many schools in desperate need of those qualities. Some states with large rural populations have begun to realize this and raise teacher salaries. Teachers in Mississippi will receive a sizable raise in 2005-2006, and legislators in Arkansas have made a similar commitment to raising teacher salaries closer toward the national average (Howell, 2000). If teaching in a rural area is made more attractive, than more qualified teachers will be willing to teach in these districts where students need committed teachers.

In addition to spending more money in teacher salaries, technology is another area where rural schools could increase their investment. One way to preserve the small size of rural schools would be to increase the capacity these schools have for distance learning. These programs make it possible for students to take classes transmitted by satellite from classrooms all over the United States. A student in rural Mississippi can receive instruction from a teacher in Boston, Massachusetts. In this forum he can ask questions and benefit from the instruction of a qualified teacher.

Colloquiums of learning can be formed in this way, where clusters of schools can be arranged so that rural schools are able to share the teaching load (Kjos, 2005). This method is still in its infant stages, but schools in some of the poorest rural areas already have at least one distance learning lab. Simmons High School in Hollandale, Mississippi has a lab as a result of a state grant, and students use it to take courses not offered at the school. Done on a larger scale, this could prove to be a better solution to helping rural schools than busing students to a union school. As Linda Martin, the leader of one small-schools advocacy group put it, “This is the age of technology, not the age of fossil-fuel burning” (McQueen, 2000).

Conclusion

The real tragedy surrounding the plight of rural schools is the lack of attention focused on the problem. Students in rural communities are scattered across large tracts of space, and do not grab the same media attention that urban schools are able to obtain. If citizens are not aware of a problem, than their elected officials are less likely to notice the problem and try to solve it.

Fixing rural schools is not simply a matter of throwing money at the problem. We cannot measure a school's success by how much money it spends, but rather how much learning is taking place. The money that is spent must be allocated in an intelligent and well-planned way that maximizes the amount of good it can do. Making rural teacher salaries more attractive and investing in long distance learning are two effective uses of money. Rural schools cannot prevent some problems, such as the closure of area businesses, but they must reach out to their families and incorporate them into the school district's vision of success. Improving the quality of rural education in this country will take time, money, and cooperation, but it is an undertaking that is worth these investments.

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