DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 104 579 RC 008 421

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TITLE Public Education in Rural America.
INSTITUTION Rural America, Inc., Washington, D.C.; Rural Housing Alliance, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 17 Apr 75
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Rural America (1st, Washington, D.C., April 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Comparative Analysis; *Educational Problems; Educational Quality; Employment Opportunities; *Federal Aid; Higher Education; Income; Migration Patterns; Needs; *Rural Areas; School District Autonomy; Unemployment; *Urban Areas

ABSTRACT

Like agriculture, public education in rural America has increasingly moved away from a small community orientation to larger consolidations. The forces of modernization, consolidation, and urbanization challenge the rural community to create a pragmatically viable alternative to the metropolitan way of life, because by adopting urban practices and curriculums, thereby encouraging outmigration of rural youth and ignoring immediate rural needs, today's rural schools are aiding, if not hastening, the process of decay in rural communities. A traditionally inadequate fiscal capacity has tended to perpetuate a cycle of poor facilities, teachers, and students; a high dropout rate; and inadequately prepared graduates, resulting in decreased employment opportunities, low income, and, ultimately, fewer taxable resources. The enormity of education related problems in rural America becomes apparent when examined in terms of comparative statistics (urban vs rural) relative to achievement, motivation, and employment prospects; number of school necessary, therefore, that: (1) Federal aid be dramatically increased; (2) effective control be returned to the local citizenry; and (3) increased attention be paid to the qualitative/substantive issues in rural education. (JC)

CONFERENCE WORKING PAPER No. 9

PUBLIC EDUCATION
IN
RURAL AMERICA

FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RURAL AMERICA

APRIL 14-17, 1975

Washington, D.C.

PREPARED BY THE CONFERENCE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
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PUBLISHED BY:

RURAL HOUSING ALLIANCE AND
RURAL AMERICA, INC.
1346 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA

Public schools are shaped by, and reflective of, the larger society they serve. Thus, the fate of rural schools is closely linked to the fate of rural America. Most of the major social and economic forces (e.g., modernization, centralization, and urbanization) that have altered life in rural America have also dramatically changed the structure and function of our rural schools.

For example, just as the trend in agriculture has been away from small, independent, family farms, and toward large, corporate agribusiness enterprises, so too, the trend in rural education has been to move away from small, community based schools and toward ever larger consolidated units. The following table, showing a decline over the past forty years in the number of school districts from 127,000 to 17,000, in the number of elementary schools from 238,000 to 71,000, and in the number of one-teacher schools from 149,000 to 4,000, show just how powerful the trend toward consolidation and centralization has been:

Table 1

Number of Districts and Schools 1930-1968
(Source, Digest of Educational Statistics, 1970. Figures rounded for easier reading.)

Year	School Districts	Elementary Schools (Total)	Elementary Schools (1-Teacher)	Secondary Schools
1930	127,000	238,000	149,000	24,000
1940	117,000	185,000	114,000	25,000
1950	84,000	128,000	60,000	24,500
1960	40,000	92,000	20,000	25,700
1969	22,000	71,000	4,000	27,000
1971	17,000			

And, just as we hear Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz declaring the "inevitability" of having upwards of a million fewer farmers by 1980, so too we hear Dr. Robert Isenberg, Associate Secretary of the American Association of

School Administrators, telling a Senate Committee in 1971 that:

> "I anticipate that within the next ten-year period we will probably see fewer than a total of 10,000 school districts. And at that time we will still be promoting even further reorganization. Ultimately it is not impossible to think that the people of this country will reduce the number of basic administrative units to not more than about 5,000, one-third to one-fourth of the present number."

In recent years, many rural people have started to challenge the value of the "bigger is better" mentality of agribusiness. These same doubts and challenges have been raised regarding the trend toward rural school and district consolidation. For example, a recent study of consolidation by Rachel Tompkins entitled Economy, Efficiency, and Equality: The Myths of Rural School Consolidation*, concluded that:

> "The benefits of school consolidation and district reorganization have been greatly exaggerated. It has not equalized resources between rural and urban areas; the resources that came with it have probably not affected achievement and lifetime success, independent of home and family background; the financial benefits have most certainly been overrated.
>
> Small schools have advantages - advantages that have seldom been valued. Smallness encourages the participation of students, places more of them in important roles than is possible in large schools, gives students of all ability and status levels a chance to perform, and so provides satisfactions that encourage feelings of self worth. No one is likely to argue that such an environment will lead to greater achievement, higher aspirations, or more occupational success. That is not the point. The point is that an

* Rachel Bussard (Tompkins), Economy, Efficiency, and Equality: The Myths of Rural School Consolidation, Unpublished Thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1973.

environment that values and needs people is an advantage - one that lessens with school consolidation. One can argue that it is an advantage that should be valued every bit as highly as economy or efficiency. Given the weakness of many of the arguments in support of consolidation, the advantages of smallness loom more important. If consolidation is no more likely to raise achievement levels, lower costs, or increase life chances, why not maintain and improve small schools and districts?

Consolidation is part of an elaborate ritual with certain standard operating procedures and symbols. The ritual is modernization and the procedures are centralization and specialization. The symbols are new schools, shiny equipment, more credentialed teachers and all the other trappings of larger schools. The symbols are important and retain their significance because everyone shares a belief that they lead to certain ends. Those who do not believe must be convinced. Evidence is collected to show that the symbols work. If the evidence is incomplete or the results ambiguous, few really notice. The important thing is to convince others to believe, not to find some objective truth.

Rural residents, by and large, came to believe in the symbols of modernization - highways, scientific agriculture, and consolidated schools. They changed the style and pace of their lives, and accepted the values of industrialized America. It seems more helpful and more honest to view consolidation as part of that process, than as some educational, organization, and financial blessing."

Herein lies the central challenge for all those concerned about the future of rural America. The forces of modernization, consolidation, and urbanization have already been set in motion in agricultural production, in rural government, in the delivery of rural social services, and in virtually every other aspect of life in rural America today. Whether this "urbanization of rural America" continues unabated, or is curbed by rural people seeking not to retreat into the

past, but rather to create a pragmatically viable alternative to the metropolitan way of life, is still a matter of choice, not destiny.

In either case, however, it is our rural educational system (from pre-schools through universities) which will most clearly reflect the final decision, and which will be given the responsibility for preparing rural residents to effectively cope with the world around them. How well have our rural schools met their responsibilities in the past? The answer is disheartening, to say the least. As the President's Commission on Rural Poverty stated in 1967:

> "Rural adults and youth are the products of an educational system that has historically shortchanged rural people. The extent to which rural people have been denied equality of educational opportunity is evident from both the products of educational system, and the resources that go into the system. On both counts, the quality of rural education ranks low."

Much of the blame for the condition of these rural schools can be assigned to the existence of a vicious cycle of inadequate rural fiscal capacity, in which a very low per capita income leads to low per pupil expenditures (even with a higher tax effort), which leads, in turn, to less than adequate facilities and instructional materials, and a disproportionate number of unqualified teachers, all of which ultimately lead to a higher dropout rate and inadequately prepared graduates. This, in turn, has led to decreased employment opportunities, as well as to low income and fewer taxable resources. This brings one back to the beginning of the cycle. And on and on it goes.

Here are a few key facts which indicate the enormity of the education-rated problems of rural America:

I. ACHIEVEMENT, MOTIVATION, PROSPECTS

National educational assessment data shows rural students achieving at a lower level than metropolitan students on

every test.

Rural students manifest a considerably lower level of educational and occupational aspirations than do their metropolitan counterparts.

Over 80% of all rural high school or college aged rural youth migrate out of their rural community for work or education. In addition, current statistics show that these rural migrants represent a grossly disproportionate percentage of the unemployed and underemployed in metropolitan America.

II. ILLITERACY

In 1970 there were 1/2 million adults over the age of 24 in rural America who had had no schooling. (1970 Census, Table 88) There were over 2 million who had had less than 5 years of school, and who are thus classified as functional illiterates. A March, 1974 census survey found 2,151,000 adults over 24 in rural areas who had had 5 years of school, almost as many as the numbers of adults in metropolitan areas (2,955,000) of the same educational status. The percentage of rural people who may be termed illiterate (5.9%) is nearly twice that (3.8%) of metropolitan areas.(1)

The percentages are higher for blacks and Spanish-speaking people, and highest for both these minorities in rural areas. While 12.9% of blacks and 17.1% of Spanish-speaking in metropolitan areas had had less than five years of school, 24.1% of blacks and 30.7% of Spanish-speaking in rural areas had dropped out by the fifth grade.(2)

III. HOW MUCH SCHOOLING

The average number of school years completed reflect the

1. Population Characteristics, March 1973 & 74, Bureau of the Census.
2. Ibid., p.36.

same rural-urban, and ethnic disparities. Urban adults in 1974 had a median of 12.4 years completed; rural non-farm a median of 12.1, and rural farm a median of 11.6. Blacks in metropolitan areas completed 11.5 years, in rural areas only 8.4. People of Spanish origin completed 9.9 years in urban areas, 8.0 in rural areas.(3)

IV. ABSENTEEISM, NON-ENROLLMENT

The 1970 Census revealed that absenteeism, permanent or chronic, varies with the income, education, and occupation of the parents, as well as their race and residence. Children's enrollment varies inversely with the income and education level of the parents. Non-Whites are less likely to enroll than whites. The percentage of children not enrolled is greatest for children of farmworkers, even higher (7%) than that for children of the unemployed. It is greater for children of farmers than for those in most other occupations.(4)

The urban-rural comparison encompasses all these conditions: as of 1970, 5.3% of rural children were not in school, as opposed to 3.8% of urban children. The difference was greatest for 16 and 17 year olds, with 12.1% of rural and 9.7% of urban youth dropping out of school.(5)

A report by the Children's Defense Fund, Children Out of School in America, suggests that these figures seriously undercount the number of children unenrolled. One reason is that Census questionnaires contained space to list only seven persons in a household. Rural households frequently number more than seven persons, and the largest families are those most likely to have children out of school.

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3. Ibid., p.39
4. Children Out of School in America, p. 39.
5. Ibid., p. 37.

Furthermore, statistics on Spanish-speaking people, many of whom are rural or farmworkers, are less reliable than those for the English-language population. The Children's Defense Fund found through its own survey that 11.4% of Mexican-American and 7.8% of Puerto Rican children are out of school, and warns that these, also, are conservative estimates. (Ibid., p.72)

The factors underlying absenteeism are intensified in rural areas. They include:

1. Need to work - children of families in agriculture are often pulled out of school at harvest time. Migrant farmworker children are frequently moved from community to community where school has temporarily closed for the harvesting season. Other children may choose to work to help out their families.

2. State Laws - Mississippi is the only state without compulsory attendance. It also has the highest percentage (7.8%) by states of children out of school. South Carolina has just phased back in its compulsory attendance law. (p. 56)

3. Lack of transportation - 13 states exempt children who live far from school bus access routes, or who must travel long distances to school. Alaska has legislated that children do not have to attend if they live more than 2 miles from either a public school or a route on which transportation is provided by the school authorities. On August 10, 1972, Native Alaskan families filed suit contending that they were being denied equal educational opportunity. They listed 148 predominantly Native villages where no high school was provided. (p. 61)

   In some school districts, such as counties in Alabama and South Carolina, children can be suspended from riding a school-bus. If their parents cannot arrange other transportation for them, they do not go to school at all. (p. 87)

Many rural districts charge for transportation. Some do not provide transportation, especially for their high school students. (Portland, Maine) (p.87)

4. Language - children who don't speak English become discouraged at schools which don't provide bi-lingual education. (p. 71)

5. Poverty - many rural school districts charge for lunches, school books and other commodities. (See Appendix K) Many rural children do not have adequate clothing and shoes for school. (pp. 78-86)

6. Sickness - poor children spend more time sick because they are less likely to get the care they need. Rural children have a higher incidence of poor health, and subsequently, of days absent from school. (p.79)

7. In five Southern States the percentage of black children in mentally retarded classes is three to five times as high as that for white children; in many the proportion is ten times as great. (p. 103)

V. HIGHER EDUCATION

A college education is, of course, less likely to be available for students affected by these conditions. While 8.7% of the adult metropolitan population has completed college, 6.1% of the rural population has a four year college education.* The disparity increases at the graduate level, and is greatest for ethnic minorities. Should a student manage to complete high school, the chances for admission to college do not compare well with those for an urban student,both because of the expense involved and the difficulty of meeting admission requirements with an inadequate education.

* Population Characteristics, March 1973 & 74, Bureau of the Census, p. 29.

VI. RURAL BLACKS

"Two out of three (65.9%) nonmetro Whites between the ages 25-44 have completed high school, compared to less than two out of five (38.7%) of those 45 years of age or older. Although for Negroes, improvement has been rapid, their educational level lags behind that of Whites. In nonmetropolitan areas, three-fourths of the Negro farm population 25 years and older had 8 years of schooling or less, compared with three-fifths of non-farm Blacks, and only 36% in metropolitan areas. Eighty-six percent of the Negro farm population 45 or older had 8 years or less schooling. More than 50% of those in the age group 25 to 44 years had attained this level of education. Still, under one-fourth (23.7%) were high school graduates. Yet, 90% of all federal funds earmarked for basic adult education are allocated to those residing in urban areas."*

VII. PART OF THE PROBLEM

Rural schools do not pay their teachers as much as urban teachers receive. On the average, they spend about 75% as much per pupil as urban areas. (The expenditure excludes transportation costs, school lunches, and other expenditures which do not contribute directly to the educational process.)**

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Public education traditionally has been perceived as a

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* Lewis Tamblyn, Inequlity, A Portrait of Rural America.
** Ibid., p. 25.

responsibility of state and local governments. Thus, it is also an area which, historically, has been neglected by the federal government.

Before 1965, federal support to the states consisted largely of providing audio-visual equipment through the National Education Administration. Since 1965, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, federal school aid has grown to include subsidies to the state for the education of the poor and the handicapped. Still, education aid has been accorded a distressingly low budgetary priority with the federal establishment.

In fiscal year (FY) 1973, elementary and secondary programs were allocated 1.68% of all federal outlays, and, should the administration's proposed budget request for 1976 be accepted by Congress, even this token appropriation will be cut by 39%, to only 1.02% of all federal outlays. This proposed budget is nearly 16% below the 1973 level of actual expenditures, which (after adjusting for inflation) will purchase 50% fewer services than did FY1973 funding. This would result in the termination of 32,000 public sector jobs (including teachers and teacher's aides) nationwide. Worse, these jobs cannot now be funded by either the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act or General Revenue Sharing since local school districts are ineligible for direct funding under either program.*

Rural areas (being generally poorer) have, even with a higher tax effort, been unable to provide educational resources comparable to those available in wealthier metropolitan communities. Thus, out of necessity, rural schools have looked toward the federal government for assistance. Unfortunately, however, such assistance has not been provided. The U.S. Office of Education recently projected that $110 billion dollars for public education will be available from all sources in 1976. The federal government

* Testimony of National School Board Association before Subcommittee on Labor, Health, Education, and Welfare, 3/20/75.

pays only a small fraction of these costs. For example, the federal budgetary authorization for all elementary and secondary education programs and activities in FY 1975 amounted to less than 9% of the nation's total public spending in these areas. That's meager enough, yet, in FY 1976 the federal share of our public education dollar will actually decline to approximately 6%.*

Considering the low level of federal funding in general, it is even more alarming to note that rural areas, which contain over 40% of the nation's poor, have received (other than in Indian programs) far less than their rightful share of federal outlays for elementary and secondary education, migrant day care, dropout prevention, Head Start, Bilingual Education, and educational opportunity programs (See Table 2 next page). One reason is that the ESEA Title I formula for appropriations has been based not only upon 1970 Census statistics on the numbers of poor, but also upon the numbers enrolled in welfare programs. Since urban areas have more money to meet the needs of those eligible for welfare, they have received a disproportionate share of available funding. The formula's urban bias should be redressed somewhat by 1974 Title I amendments which require that states base their funding requests upon either census or welfare statistics, but not both. The amendments are too complex to outline here, but their total effect should be to distribute a greater portion of federal funds to rural people.

On February 6, 1975, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare presented an analysis of all its Education programs to the Senate Subcommittee on Rural Development.** Despite the disproportionately high level of poverty, illi-

* "Preliminary Drafts of Functional Issue Papers", p. 8-4, Committee for Full funding of Education Programs.

** The education section of this report, entitled HEW Program for Rural America, is included here, in full, as Appendix A.

Table 2 – Federal Outlays for Education Accruing to Metro and Nonmetro Counties, Fiscal Year 1973*

Item	Agency	Total	Metropolitan							Nonmetropolitan					
			Total	Greater			Medium	Lesser	Total	Urbanized		Less urbanized		Thinly populated	
				Total	Core	Fringe				Adjacent	Non-adjacent	Adjacent	Non-adjacent	Adjacent	Non-adjacent
		Mil. dols.	Percent Distribution												
Elementary and Secondary Education															
Indian Education-Grants to LEA's	HEW	11.3	25.1	7.1	6.3	.7	11.9	6.2	74.9	11.3	5.1	13.0	24.9	2.3	18.3
Educationally Deprived Children-LEA	HEW	1,316.3	64.2	40.2	34.2	6.0	17.2	6.8	35.8	6.0	3.8	9.2	10.3	2.2	4.4
Educationally Deprived Children-Migrant	HEW	70.7	92.2	8.7	8.7	.0	60.8	22.7	7.8	5.4	2.4	.1	1/	.0	.0
Dropout Prevention	HEW	8.2	87.1	69.7	65.7	4.0	15.2	2.2	12.9	1.8	2.2	3.0	6.0	.0	.0
Follow-Through	HEW	52.9	74.0	35.3	27.0	8.3	28.3	10.5	26.0	4.6	6.8	6.4	4.4	1.4	2.4
Child Development Head Start	HEW	360.6	63.2	30.9	25.8	5.1	22.0	10.3	36.8	7.2	7.4	7.8	10.2	.8	3.4
Bilingual Education	HEW	32.9	80.2	50.1	47.3	2.8	19.9	10.2	19.8	4.6	3.0	3.5	4.7	.9	3.1
Educational Opportunity Grants	HEW	205.6	75.5	39.2	32.2	7.0	23.7	12.6	24.5	8.4	4.9	4.2	6.2	.2	.6

* Taken from Rural Development, 5th Annual Report of the President to the Congress on Government Services to Rural America.

1/ Less than .05%.

teracy, low educational achievement, and "educationally deprived" children found in rural areas throughout the nation, this HEW report acknowledged the following:

A. Elementary and Secondary Education

1. Educationally deprived children (Title I)

"A review of the financial data from FY1970, as compared with FY1972, indicates that the total funding of the seven DHEW OE programs underwritten with Title I funds, increased by $223 million...However, the percentage of total obligations to nonmetropolitan local educational agencies (LEAS) decreased over this period from forty-five to forty-one percent."

2. School library resources (Title II)

"Special consideration is given to children attending rural and Indian schools by reserving up to three percent of the total national allotment for the improvement of library resources in such schools...Obligations for nonmetropolitan areas increased from $4.1 million, or approximately ten percent of total in FY1970 to $10.2 million, or eleven percent of total Title II obligations in FY1972."

3. Supplemental education centers (Title III)

"During FY1972, obligations under the Supplemental Educational Centers and Services, Guidance, Counseling and Testing program totaled $121.7 million and $17.5 million for nonmetropolitan areas."

4. Bilingual education (Title VII)

"Obligation levels in FY1972 and 1973 were $35 million with an estimated $8.5 million for nonmetropolitan areas."

B. Higher Education

1. Guaranteed Student Loan (GSL) Program

"The GSL program insures loans for educational expenses...Loans may be used only to pay costs

of obtaining post-secondary education...Only fourteen percent, or $22.9 million of the obligations went to rural areas. A contributing factor to this low percentage is that most of the lenders with sufficient assets for student loans are located in metropolitan areas."

2. Educational Opportunity Centers

"Educational Opportunity Centers located in areas with major concentrations of low income persons provide information concerning financial and other assistance available for area residents who seek postsecondary education...Of the approximately $3 million obligated for these activities in FY1974, most of it probably went to urban areas, where the problems of low income are considered more acute. Centers in metropolitan areas can also serve greater concentrations of people."

C. Adult and Vocational Education

1. Basic Grants

"Emphasis is placed on programs located in economically depressed areas, or areas with high rates of unemployment. In FY1972, total obligations totaled $409.4 million with $53.5 million, or thirteen percent, going to nonmetropolitan areas."

2. Special Needs

"The Special Needs Program fills the educational needs of persons with academic, socio-economic, or other social handicaps...Total obligations in FY1972 were $20 million with fifteen percent or $2.6 million going to nonmetropolitan areas."

D. Education Professions Development (EPD)

1. EPD/Urban-Rural School Development Grants

"Nonmetropolitan areas received approximately twenty

percent of the total funds obligated for these two EPD programs. This share is about the same as in 1970. Urban areas receive the greatest share because it is the perception of program management that the problems of low income are greater in inner cities."

2. Teacher Corps

"Approximately thirty percent of the $35 million obligation for Teacher Corps was spent on nonmetropolitan university/school Teacher Corps program in FY1972 ($10.6 million). This figure represents a twelve percent increase in the proportion of funds spent in rural areas in FY1970."

E. National Institute of Education (NIE)

"...the majority of the Institute's present activities are focused in metropolitan areas...in FY1972, of approximately $65 million obligated to former Office of Education research and demonstration programs that were subsequently transferred to the National Institute of Education, only five percent was obligated to rural areas. The figures for FY1970 were roughly analogous."

In considering these rather dismal facts regarding HEW's rural education effort, it must also be remembered that they primarily address patterns of funding discrimination rather than the quality of these same programs. All too often, even when funds are available, they end up being of little lasting value to rural children. Inappropriate and outdated programs, local mismanagement, and bureaucratic obstruction have become the rule, rather than the exception, in federal programs for rural education.

Conclusions

Rural citizens have historically been shortchanged by the educational systems serving them. The effects of this failure (in terms of illiteracy, lack of marketable skills, lost opportunity, or low educational achievement) have had a crippling effect on the lives and aspirations of rural children and adults throughout America.

Whether intentionally or unwittingly, rural school systems have accepted the assumptions of metropolitan America, i.e., that rural America is an anachronism in our modern urban world and, therefore, bringing rural America into line with metropolitan life styles, economics, and culture makes obvious good sense. Consequently, in making this assumption, rural school systems have pushed ahead with all their energy to prepare children for lives in the urban environment they see as being inevitable. However, by encouraging the outmigration of rural youth, by adopting urban curriculums and practices, and by remaining aloof from the immediate, pressing needs of the rural areas in which they are located, today's rural schools are aiding, and perhaps hastening, the process of decay in our rural communities.

Public education in rural America is plagued by chronic under-financing, continuing neglect by national policymakers, and inappropriate, ill-conceived programs and practices. Solving these problems is by no means an impossible endeavor. It requires only the combination of national will and increased human and financial resources. For too long, we, as a society, have avoided this task. We cannot afford the human and economic costs any longer.

Recommendations

There is much which should (and can) be done to improve education for rural children. From within the schools and in the communities efforts should be directed toward helping rural educational institutions become more valuable resources, both for the individual development of a much larger percentage of rural students and, especially, for the overall rejuvenation and redevelopment of America's rural communities.

Where should we start this reform process?

First, and foremost, federal financial support of public education in rural America must be dramatically increased. Without such funding, there can be nothing approaching equality of educations for rural children.

Second, effective control over rural schools must be returned to the local citizenry, rather than remaining in the hands of education professionals. No governmental action resulting in structural changes within rural schools (such as consolidation) should be taken without the express consent of the people concerned. Federal programs should be used to ensure that state and local agencies abide by the will of the local citizenry, and to enforce the rights of "ordinary" rural citizens to participate in the decision-making processes of their public schools.

Third, increased attention must be paid to the qualitative/substantive issues in rural education. What, in fact, does it really mean to meet the needs of rural people? Does it mean giving them urban oriented skills that raise their level of competency but force them to leave the community in order to use these skills? Does it mean that schools should focus exclusively on the provision of basic skills? Does it mean that the schools must begin playing a significant role in the community's economic development plans? These are difficult questions, yet they must be answered if educational institutions are going to hold genuine value for the people and communities they ostensibly serve.

Note: For informative comments and statistics on rural Federal programs, see HEW Programs For Rural America, Subcommittee on Rural Development, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, United States Senate, February 6, 1975. Copies are available at the conference.