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ABSTRACT

Comprehension of the current condition of rural education is essential to national education policy and program considerations, yet rural schools go unnoticed at the federal level because of a paucity of national rural data. The changing nature of rural population, the national mandate for equal educational opportunity, and the need for a timely concept of rural development are all justifications for an expanded rural education data base. The data base should include information on student populations, the schools and school staff characteristics, and educational finance. This information should be gathered via: periodic studies of the status of rural education at the local, regional, and national level; analytic synthesis of work on many topics affecting rural students; and the routine inclusion of rural schools and students in all major congressionally mandated studies. Descriptions of 12 federal information sources--such as the Departments of HEW, Labor, and Agriculture, the Bureau of the Census, and the General Accounting Office--stress the particular strengths and weaknesses of those sources and emphasize that no one governmental source has all the information on rural education. The agency descriptions serve much as an annotated bibliography for the information seeker. Recommendations include providing for systematic collection of rural data, merging of agency data, and creating a National Center for Rural Education Studies. (SB)

IMAGINARY GARDENS? REAL PROBLEMS

An Analysis of Federal Information Sources on Rural Education

by

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NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

During the recent debates surrounding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a U.S. Office of Education Official asked a provocative question: "Where are the numbers on rural education?" He explained the dilemma that confronts policy makers at the highest level:

> We've got plenty of evidence about what's happening in urban schools, so we can make the case for increased federal assistance without too much difficulty. But making a case for rural schools is a lot harder because we don't have the supporting data.

Where are the numbers? Coming to grips with this question, which has been asked by members of Congress, federal officials, and rural advocates over the years, is the purpose of this report. Consequently, we are attempting here to present a description of federal sources of information on rural education. We are according particular attention to the relative strengths and weaknesses of these information sources so that what is missing in national data on rural education will become as apparent as what is available. There are, at the end, brief recommendations for improving both the quality and availability of the facts and figures on American rural education today. The reader should be forewarned, however, that this report does not presume to present or interpret the findings of available national data or to evaluate the content of interpretative reports beyond citing obvious rural omissions (Henderson, 1973; Sher, 1977; and Tamblyn, 1973).

Before beginning the agency-by-agency descriptions, it may be useful to provide a context for this report by considering two fundamental concerns. The first concern is with why so little is known about rural schools at the national level. The second concern is to identify reasons for establishing

a more extensive and reliable data base in this field. Only through exploring these issues can we make clear the nature and dimensions of the problem.

A fragment from one of Marianne Moore's poems keeps coming to mind, the phrase "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (Utermeyer, 1962). Outside the world of poetry, how can such a thing be? It must be that, to many people, rural America is an imaginary garden, banished from national existence by urbanizing trends many years ago but continuing to plague us with those real toads (i.e., problems) that keep hopping around: poverty; inadequate services for health, transportation, communication, and sanitation; youth unemployment. These are not simply "problems," however, although many of the same lamentable conditions exist in central cities. The type of setting and the history of policies affecting that setting must be considered before one can understand the nature of the problem or propose solutions. In the past, real policies and actions taken by policy makers and established organizations had real effects on rural America (Tyack, 1975), however imaginary a garden it may presently seem to some people. And as all rural educators probably know by now, rural areas (especially those not near metropolitan centers) have been growing faster than urban areas for some time (Beale, 1978).

To many people, though, there simply is no "rural" education problem, as distinct from general problems in education. The question and comment often go something like this: "What is different about rural schools? Isn't the problem one of individualizing instruction for all the students and giving them an education appropriate for their needs, no matter where they live? Don't cities and suburbs have the same problems?"

This line of reasoning both misses the point and points up the essential dilemma, which is that one needs to have information in order to justify need for information. The point is that where children live affects the kind of education "appropriate for their needs," and clearly affects parental and community notions of appropriateness (Peshkin, 1978). There is, furthermore, enough information to indicate that rural schools seem less favored in offerings, services, and financial resources than schools generally; that there is a rural achievement/attainment problem; and that the rural poor are among the poorest in the nation (Fratoe, 1978). Beyond that, there is simply the fact--documented throughout so much of American history in novels, poems, songs, diaries, films, and documentaries--that rural is different from urban and that these people who prefer rurality because of its difference must all too often suffer from inadequate services and opportunities because of their choice.

When asked why there is such a paucity of national rural data, federal education officials and congressional staff members frequently reply that rural education as a whole is simply not among federal priorities. In other words, the low level of available information reflects the low level of importance assigned to specifically rural educational problems and concerns by both Congress and the Administration.

How did rural education come to acquire such low status? Clearly, the reasons are not based on numerical criteria, for such criteria would allocate a far more prominent position to rural education in the national education hierarchy. More than two-thirds of the nation's school districts lie outside the bounds of recognized metropolitan areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972 Census of Governments). The most surprising fact about rural

schools, however, may be the number of students who attend them. Although the figures are not wholly accurate or complete, even a conservative estimate would indicate that there were approximately 15 million children, aged 5 through 17, enrolled in nonmetropolitan schools in 1975 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract, 1976). This translates into approximately one-third of all children enrolled in U.S. public schools during that same year (Census, 1976). This means that there are actually more students in nonmetropolitan schools than there are in central city schools (Census, 1976).

Despite their numbers, rural schools continue to be unnoticed at the federal level. Perhaps this neglect can be attributed to the perceived political importance of this constituency rather than its numerical importance. For years, political observers have noted that, in order to function with even modest effectiveness, governments must apply the principle of "selective inattention" to some problems, issues, and constituencies. In other words, since governments may not be able to cope with everyone's problems at the same time, there is a tendency to treat certain people and their concerns with what Senator Moynihan once called "benign neglect."

Given the available evidence in this document and in other writings, it appears that rural education is a textbook example of a constituency selected for governmental inattention (Tamblyn, 1975; and Sher, 1977). For instance, it is perhaps worth pointing out once again that despite the presence of thousands of federal employees working in the field of education, and despite the billions of federal tax dollars expended each year on education, there is still not a single federal division, commission,

task force or even a federal education official having sole explicit responsibility for assisting America's rural schools and schoolchildren.

There is nothing mysterious about this pattern of benign neglect. The key to understanding what has happened can be found by examining the forces shaping attitudes about what is important and what merits attention. These key influences are as follows:

1. First-Hand Experience or Daily Contact. Being human, policymakers tend to be most aware of and interested in those people and problems with which they have regular contacts. The special problems of today's rural schools, however, are not familiar to more than a handful of federal educational policymakers. Thus federal indifference toward rural schools may stem, at least in part, from the manifestation of the maxim "out-of-sight, out-of-mind."
2. Intensive Lobbying and Protests. Federal policymakers are notably "crisis-oriented," and in government, as in much of life, it is the "squeaky wheel" that gets the grease. The number of well-financed, sophisticated lobbying groups operating in Washington is large; and the results of their labors are apparent in the decisions made and priorities established within Congress and the federal bureaucracy. Yet rural people (when they are organized at all) have traditionally organized along economic lines (e.g., as farmers or miners), along ethnic lines (e.g., as Chicanos or Native Americans) or along state/regional lines (e.g., as Alaskans or Appalachians) rather than

as rural people per se. Similarly, since the 1930's, there have been few examples of major rural protest movements or visible demonstrations protesting unjust treatment on non-economic issues. Thus if federal policymakers believe that rural education can continue to be ignored without negative political repercussions, they do so with some justification.

3. Collegial and Academic Influences. Policymakers can be swayed by the arguments and evidence advanced by leading academics and national opinion leaders. Since rural issues, rural people, and rural research (particularly in an area like education) are not routinely considered within the nation's leading policy research centers and prestigious universities, there is little pressure on policymakers from this source to take rural education more seriously.

4. Mass Media Influences. To the degree that policymakers assign importance to particular issues and populations as a result of coverage in the national media, these officials can feel secure about their tendency to overlook rural schools and their problems. The nation's major newspapers, magazines, and broadcast industry seem oriented toward metropolitan affairs. Unfortunately, this attitude is mirrored by the leading academic and educational trade publications in the U.S. Thus there is virtually nothing in the media's view of the world that would encourage federal policymakers to rethink their proclivity toward putting rural matters on the back burner of national educational policy.

The reader's attention must be called to the existence of one major technical obstacle as well. If the federal government makes a commitment to creating a rural data base, it will be frustrated by its past failures to resolve the issue of conflicting definitions of "rural."

At present, several significantly different definitions of "rural" are used in federal legislation and by federal agencies. For example, the USDA's Farmer's Home Administration alone makes loans based on three entirely distinct conceptions of "rural" (National Rural Center, 1978). Similarly, some federal agencies collect data based on a definition of rural as the open countryside and nearly all places with fewer than 2,500 residents (National Rural Center), while another popular definition among federal agencies takes "rural" to be places outside the boundaries of standardized metropolitan statistical areas (SMSA's) (National Rural Center, 1978). These two "standard" definitions, however, are by no means the only ones being used. The U.S. Department of Transportation uses rural to mean all "non-urbanized" places of 5,000 or fewer residents (National Rural Center, 1978). The U.S. Senate (in the Rural Development Act of 1972) gave several definitions of rural beginning at places of 5,500 or less and gradually worked its way up to places of up to 50,000 residents (National Rural Center, 1978). Finally, one federally funded education data source invented its own definition of rural, which translated into all nonmetropolitan communities with a population under 8,000 and a work-force that is primarily agricultural (Henderson, 1973). Although this report is not the place to rehash the controversy over definitions, it is clear that the absence of a common definition of "rural" in general

and "rural schools" in particular is a central technical impediment to an adequate federal data base.

In the face of this disheartening assessment, one could be excused for feeling that any effort to upgrade federal information sources on rural education may be a hopeless enterprise. There are, nevertheless, substantial arguments for seeking a strengthened national data base. There are also some indications that the kind of political developments necessary to realize this improvement may be attainable.

As became evident once again during the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the presence of adequate data would eliminate the tendency to dismiss any consideration of uniquely rural problems on the grounds that too little is known. Similarly, the notably low level of federal research funds allocated to rural education concerns might, at least in part, be explained by the weak national data base in this field. Although one might think that the paucity of reliable information on rural education would make it a prime candidate for large-scale federal funding, this is not the case. What actually happens is that rural education researchers are handicapped in their efforts to secure federal funding by several things:

1. They often lack the background data (such as data on the seriousness or extent of a particular problem in rural areas) that they need in order to make successful application or to demonstrate the importance of rural problems vis-a-vis metropolitan ones.

2. The data they do cite often appear to be (and sometimes are) impressionistic or a bit random (e.g., statistics from three states and research done in a few countries). Thus they lack the more compelling authority of national data.
3. The costs of doing research comparable to that routinely conducted on urban problems are often prohibitively high because the foundation of national data and research are absent, and must be compensated for by the rural researcher.

Another difficulty caused or exacerbated by insufficient national data shows up in the programmatic guidelines and regulations drawn up by federal education agencies. For example, when funds are distributed on a per-pupil basis, rural schools may not receive the minimum amount necessary to run the funded program. Similarly, federal guidelines may force rural schools to adopt materials and practices that are inappropriate or even genuinely destructive to the traditions and circumstances of the school system. It has been argued that rural districts are not compelled to accept these federal guidelines <u>if they forego the funds as well</u>. Some rural school districts have indeed declined federal funds, apparently because the "strings attached" were too burdensome. Advocates of this type of rural self-denial may overlook two facts. First, given the difficult financial problems facing rural schools, particularly in poverty areas, there is real pressure to accept <u>any</u> available funds, regardless of conditions attached. Second, the rural children who need some services provided through federal programs must usually do without those services if federal funds are not made available. Surely this sort of situation is an important consequence which arises because federal policymakers often lack the data

and understanding of rural conditions that they need to produce appropriate guidelines and regulations.

The suspicion that rural schools and school districts do not receive their "fair share" of federal education funds is related to the matter above. The contention has been made that this type of rural discrimination can be found in federal funding formulae, which are skewed in favor of large cities and suburbs, and in the fact that even the smallest rural school districts are often placed in direct competition with New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other urban giants for the same pot of federal monies. It has been suggested that, because of poor knowledge of American rural education today, federal policymakers do not take this constituency seriously or treat it fairly in the distribution of federal resources.

If these contentions are true, they represent a major departure from the federal government's avowed commitment to equal educational opportunity. A national government dedicated to the eradication of discrimination should not perpetuate discrimination based upon "place of residence" or "density of population." If, however, these suspicions are unfounded, they should be laid to rest once and for all. The real point here is that these suspicions can be neither confirmed nor rejected in the absence of reliable national information on rural education.

Perhaps the most interesting dilemma of all is how policymakers can formulate appropriate and effective national education policies and programs without knowing much about the rural sector. Are national policies

taking into account such major changes in the rural sector as a stiffening resistance to further school consolidation and district reorganization; wildly fluctuating enrollment patterns as some rural schools suddenly have to accommodate three times as many (or two thirds fewer) students than in the previous year; the presence of new educational cooperatives and service agencies; and the growing variations among states and regions of the country in terms of their rural problems, characteristics, and prospects? Again, the question needs to be asked as to how federal officials are to do a competent job of educational policymaking for the nation if they have little or no reliable information on the sector containing two-thirds of the nation's school districts, one-half of the nation's schools, and one-third of the nation's students.

A change that should be noted, even though it is still in the embryonic stage, is the increasing willingness of rural people to organize politically on educational as well as economic issues. Within the past two years, there has been a significant rise in the instances of rural organizing around school problems and concerns. Most of this new rural activism has occurred at the local and, occasionally, the state level; but if it continues to grow and become more sophisticated (as seems likely), it will not be long until the federal government and Congress become targets of attention.

Perhaps the needed changes in federal education policy may come to pass. The logical arguments for making such changes have never been lacking. Federal policymakers, however, have lacked the will to act in the absence of public pressure. Rural leaders have also been remiss by failing to press their arguments and by failing to organize for effective political

action. Their passivity has contributed to their own invisibility to the federal bureaucracy. The time has come to redress these past errors. Finding out what is really happening by building a federal information base is an excellent place to begin the process of appropriately aiding rural schools.

THE NEED FOR INFORMATION

Reasons for the Need

Whatever the cause of inadequate rural education data may be -- selective inattention, benign neglect, an invisibility phenomenon, or a rear-view mirror syndrome in the national consciousness that simply does not acknowledge recent population trends -- it is important to specify the justifications that now exist for an expanded rural education data base.

There are three fundamental reasons for federal agencies to begin taking the rural education problem seriously enough to initiate data collection and dissemination activities. They are (1) the changing nature of the countryside as a result of current and predicted migration trends; (2) the national mandate for justice and fairness, or equal educational opportunity; and (3) the need for a timely concept of rural development.

The Changing Nature of the Countryside

In a recent paper, Dr. Calvin Beale of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Population Studies Group made the following observation:

> With some diffidence, I suggest that the [reverse migration] trend will continue in the next decade. The fact that it is produced by a variety of causes and is somewhat international in character strengthens my view that it is not likely to end very soon or abruptly . . . . The technology of data and communication is

> replacing some of the face-to-face contacts once necessary and obtainable only by urban agglomeration, and allows for a more decentralized business pattern.
>
> I do not suggest that we are about to become a rural nation again. We will continue to be predominantly metropolitan and urban, but with a lower percentage of our people living in the major centers. . . . and a larger proportion living in small or medium-sized metro areas and in rural areas and small towns. In effect, the nation has all of the megascale urbanization that it needs to function as a modern society, and has probably exceeded the most desirable level in terms of its general social health. The collective triumph of the layman and the business community around the turn of this decade was that they perceived this situation. Through a host of individually made decisions, they began to shift the net flow of population and business before either the academic community or the government understood what was going on (Beale, 1978).

As Beale notes in other portions of the same paper, federal data on this phenomenon are limited but even so, very suggestive. We do know that the increased rural population consists of (1) urban natives, (2) returning rural natives, and (3) rural youths who are staying home. We know that rural population growth affects every region of the country; that the migrating group tends to be younger, better educated, and wealthier than average rural residents; and that financial factors are rarely paramount in decisions to migrate (Beale, 1978).

As we construct mental scenarios of changes that may result from the trend under consideration, we should consider what happened with respect to cities between 1940 and 1970 -- taking into account both the growth itself and the rate at which urban populations expanded (Hoke, 1979). The phenomenon changed the character of the country; it brought severe social problems, straining social services and financial resources in painful fashion. It certainly made clear the relationship between rural vitality and urban vitality. That is, many of those people who became

the central city poor had once been rural poor people unable to find opportunities at home.

With respect to the urban-to-rural migration, two things are probably true. (1) Whatever social changes may occur in the countryside, they will not precisely replicate changes that occurred in cities. (2) The other point, however, is that migration will bring social changes, which will mean conflicts and problems of one sort or another. Conflict is not always undesirable; in fact, it can generate creative actions as new solutions are sought, provided communities are in a position to respond to the challenge (Edgar, 1978). If, however, communities are both unprepared for changes and unable to find information and expertise when they need help, the results of conflict can be extremely damaging. Certainly, information with some predictive capacity has a role to play in enabling rural communities--as well as planners at national and state levels -- to cope with changes that are sure to come with population shifts.

The National Mandate for Justice and Fairness or Equal Educational Opportunity

Almost 20% of nonmetropolitan children are poor. If we are to take seriously the charge to assure all students an equal opportunity to secure an education of high quality, we must not by oversight neglect this significant proportion of poor children or the rural communities that are too poor to provide good education without additional aid. While one certainly could not make a good argument that all, or even most, rural people are economically disadvantaged (although those who are poor are among the nation's poorest), one might make an argument that rurality at this time

tends to be a disadvantaged condition, with the exception of wealthy agricultural areas, most notably those of the Midwest.

In the case of America's less fortunate rural areas, being disadvantaged means suffering from the cumulative effects of prior policies and the attitudes they helped foster. Policies leading to declining numbers of small farms; loss of medical facilities; consolidation of small community schools into larger, centralized units; and business/industrial tendencies to locate in metropolitan areas, have tended to create depressed rural conditions that interact in such a fashion as to create decline and further depression. Loss of farm income and ownership leads to economic decline, which creates a depressed condition affecting other community institutions. Communities lacking strong schools do not attract industries or educated migrants; they have difficulty attracting professionals like physicians and lawyers. And a community that lacks a strong core of professionals tends to have a hard time providing excellent education. Although the picture is changing in some communities, it is still fair to say that rural communities are characterized by disproportionate numbers of the very young and the elderly -- those most in need of services and least able to generate income.

Taking into account, then, both the perspective of national well-being and the constitutional concern for individual rights, it would seem logical to initiate policies to rectify past neglect. Indeed, this has been the policy undertaken on behalf of many groups considered to be disadvantaged by virtue of prior discriminatory treatment or because

of present poverty: Blacks, American Indians, Hispanics, other racial and ethnic minorities, migrant children, and women. At the present time, federal data-gathering agencies collect education data on minorities, Whites, women, and the poor. Such data are not routinely collected on rural schools and rural students, although the poorest Blacks, for example, are rural.

Yet if we are to take steps toward improving the status of rural education, we must know with more precision than is now possible what that status is. Dr. Frank Fratoe (USDA/ESCS) has written of the situation in a personal communication:

> The current small federal data base on rural education contrasts sharply with the magnitude of its subject . . . . When pressed for answers to questions concerning rural student performance, rural school district facilities, or the quality of the programs and teaching staff in rural schools, researchers cannot reply with more than the barest facts (Fratoe, 1979).

As we will show in part three of this paper, sometimes one lacks even facts.

The Need for a Timely Concept of Rural Development

Although the U.S. has a Rural Development Act, it does not yet have a comprehensive rural development policy. First of all, the Rural Development Act of 1972 has been only partially implemented. Second, it does not seem to provide for certain systematic linkages that are very important, e.g., those between public schools and other sectors. A national policy, we believe, should take the position that rural development should be approached comprehensively, with attention being given to existing and needed relationships among various community institutions

and sectors. Such a policy would probably define education more broadly than as "schooling" in the traditional sense of the school-aged population having classes in a building from nine to three. A good education development policy would seek to link schoolhouse instruction with other activities in the community and would seek ways of using other institutions to strengthen schools.

A good rural development policy would be concerned with educational efficiency in the sense that it would include, but would not be limited to, financial considerations, and certainly it would not be limited to immediate rather than long-term considerations. There would be attempts to estimate social and economic costs over the long run and to determine cost/benefit ratios for various alternatives. A good policy would doubtless pay as much attention to enhancing community problem-solving capacity as it would to economic development activity.

It is, however, impossible to conceive of this kind of activity -- programmatic, comprehensive, developmental, future-oriented -- taking place without access to reliable, comprehensive information on rural education and related services and conditions. The current absence of such information helps illuminate the meaning of rural isolation. A special feature of isolation as it pertains to rural Americans is exclusion from major national activities like routine collection of data. It can mean being left out, or left behind, to the point of seeming invisible. Thus there has evolved a cycle that needs to be broken: exclusion creates isolation; developmental activities are needed to break the isolation; isolation creates invisibility and more exclusion, making development very difficult.

Types of Information Needed

The question to ask next is, "What information do we need as a baseline for comprehending specific features of the rural education condition, as well as its totality?"

We need periodic studies of the status of rural education at national, regional, and local levels. We need strong analytic syntheses of the "best" work that has been done on a number of topics affecting rural students: programs that "work;" school staff characteristics, with particular attention to the problem of securing and maintaining good rural teachers and administrators; the dynamics of school-community relations; education governance; comparisons of student aspiration and attainment by region, race, SES, sex; and the costs of maintaining various types of rural schools. Moreover, it is essential that rural schools and rural students be routinely included in all major congressionally mandated studies conducted by such agencies as NIE (e.g., the compensatory education study of 1977 and the forthcoming vocational education study).

Researchers, policymakers, education administrators and program developers need ready access to descriptive and analytic national data that collectively present an accurate portrait of rural America's education systems. Such a portrait would include the wealth and demographic characteristics of rural communities by state, county, and school district and by type of rurality; the financing and operating costs of rural schools; school characteristics by size, staffing, organization, curricular offerings, and services; and student characteristics (by age, race, sex, SES, and type of rurality) of enrollment in vocational educational programs,

post secondary plans and attendance, achievement, attainment, and aspiration. If collected at the county/school district level, these data would not only tell us a great deal about the national picture generally, they also would enable us to construct local, state, and regional pictures that show the variance among rural schools and school districts as well as among rural communities. Finally, we need analytic data, collected systematically, that reflect community satisfaction with schools - perhaps a "community-satisfaction-with-schools index."

The point about variance is one of great consequence for understanding "rural America." Detailed and comprehensive data, properly assembled and interpreted, would lay to rest, at least empirically, whatever myths remain about a monolithic rural population. One suspects that once that myth is exploded, the accompanying tendency to think of rural schools as needing to have the same or similar policies, programs, and organization characteristics would also be muted, if not laid to rest.

The need for a community-satisfaction-with-schools index is taken from a specific policy recommendation(put forth by Alan Peshkin in a landmark study of school-community relationships in a small town): that "community" be allowed, formally and programmatically to compete with other socially desirable goods, e.g., comprehensive instruction and individual upward mobility, decisions about school size and organization (Peshkin, 1978). In that report, Peshkin makes the point that it is wrong, historically and sociologically, to think of schools as institutions that serve only the needs of individuals for opportunity and upward mobility. They have traditionally, Peshkin agrues, served as central community institutions which maintain a local identity and, in that regard, deserve consideration within a community context.

As a way of summarizing these remarks, the Table on Page 21 (Information Needed on Rural Education) shows the type of data we need if we are to comprehend the current condition of rural education -- clearly a necessary prelude to policy and program recommendations.

FEDERAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Some General Observations

Before describing data collection activities in various branches of the federal government, it seems appropriate to point out two characteristics of data collection generally, particularly as they affect rural education.

First, there has been an attempt to coordinate education data through a Federal Interagency Consortium that has made available a Directory of Federal Agency Education Data Tapes, including those from NCES, NIE, OCR, ERDA, NSF, Census, HRA, NCHS, NCSS, and CSC.

The Directory of Federal Agency Education Data Tapes specifies, for each study or data gathering activity that is included, a description of the methodology and the population from which samples are drawn. Schools having fewer than 300 students are often routinely excluded; districts with fewer than 1,000 students are frequently excluded (NCES, Directory, passim).

Second, there appears to be no attempt by any federal agency to pull together rural education data, or even rural data, into a "digest" publication, and rural data are often hidden or simply not reported in the major publications. Moreover, there is a notable and significant omission in a lengthy document recently published by the U.S. Department of Commerce's

INFORMATION NEEDED ON RURAL EDUCATION

TYPE OF DATA BY REGION, STATE, LOCALITY	TOTAL POPULATION	STUDENT POPULATION	SCHOOL AND SCHOOL STAFF CHARACTERISTICS	EDUCATION FINANCE
Size	X	X	X	
Age	X	X	X (Staff)	
SES	X	X		
Race/Ethnicity	X	X	X (Staff)	
Sex	X	X		
Employment/Unemployment	X	X		
Source of Personal Income	X			
Education Attainment	X	X	X (Staff)	
Enrollment/ by Type of Program		X		
Achievement		X		
Organization & Govt.			X	
Curricula			X	
Special Services			X	
Vocational Education			X	
Source of Funds by % Federal, State, Local				X
Expenditure by Type				X
Years of Experience			X (Staff)	

Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards. That document, A Framework for Planning U.S. Federal Statistics, examines inadequacies in federal data collection efforts but makes no mention of the need for improved rural information in the sections on education statistics, income and wealth statistics, labor statistics, or population statistics (Department of Commerce, 1978).

These are significant characteristics. They tell us that we cannot go to a single comprehensive source or to combined publications that report education and related data and construct a complete picture of rural America's students, personnel, and clients.

The Education Division, DHEW

National Center for Education Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics has two regular publications of tremendous significance for education, the Digest of Education Statistics and The Condition of Education, both published annually. They include data collected by NCES, other federal agencies (e.g., the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of the Census), and private and international organizations (e.g., the American Council on Education, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

In terms of both major and significant categories, The Condition of Education provides a comprehensive overview of American education, except for rural students, schools, school staff, etc. and rural education as a special category of education generally. Given the fact that this publication provides detailed and specific information in many important categories -- elementary and secondary education, postsecondary education,

education personnel, financing higher education, youth labor force participation -- and the fact that it typically breaks out categories by race and sex, the rural omission is significant.

In fact, as recently as 1977 The Condition of Education reported in the section on "Demographic Changes" that "foremost among demographic trends has been the continuing exodus of population from the cities to the suburbs" (NCES). There is no mention at all of migration to the countryside, although Calvin Beale had been reporting on the trend for several years prior to 1977.

The Digest of Education Statistics shows significant education facts in compact tabular form with limited commentary. It reflects the fact that not much is available in the way of data on rural students within each of the topics. It does show a few statistics on public school systems by enrollment size (the same information is given in Statistical Abstracts, published by the Bureau of the Census). The same page gives gross financial information by category. After that, the information is, to put it euphemistically, elusive.

One category, that of teacher characteristics, may serve to illustrate the difficulties. Numbers of teachers are reported for all levels of classroom by state and by sex. Salaries are shown by state. Instructional staff numbers are given for each state for each type of position. The information is not reported for metro and nonmetro areas, however, nor is there a breakout for the rural sector. In view of the fact that staffing is a major concern of many rural school districts, it is strange that this problem is not given any attention in a national report.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education

The Assistant Secretary's office supports a range of studies on education policy and finance. To date, however, ASE has provided funds to support only one rural education study. It is being conducted, on a very small budget, by Dr. Gail Bass of the Rand Corporation and will examine questions of finance, with special reference to the impact and funds allocation of selected federal programs in urban, rural, and "mixed" states. When it has been completed, the study should provide useful information on federal allocations to different types of states as well as on state allocations to urban and rural areas within states.

U.S. Office of Education

The 1977 list of USOE publications contains about 135 titles. No report is on American rural education, nor is rural or nonmetro featured as a subcategory in any of the titles (there are, however, reports on education in Ecuador, Tunisia, and Poland). The USOE employees contacted by the authors have indicated, in fact, that the Office does not publish any special reports on rural education or, to the best of their knowledge, make systematic attempts to report data on the rural sector when it prepares its documents.

The National Institute of Education

The NIE, established by an act of Congress in 1972, is expressly charged with the task of:

> improving the ability of schools to meet their responsibilities to provide equal educational opportunities for students of limited English-speaking ability, women, and students who are socially, economically, or educationally disadvantaged (NIE, Reflections and Recommendations, 1979).

Although the Institute has taken on various organizational forms in the past seven years, its current form of three main divisions -- Educational Policy and Organization, Teaching and Learning, Dissemination and Improvement of Practice -- probably reflects the general characteristics of research supported by NIE over the years.

As reported in the National Council on Educational Research's Fourth Annual Report and as reflected in the NIE supported activities, there does not appear to be a great deal of systematic information on rural schools coming from the Institute. In fact, 1979 program plans note the following four priorities: Student Achievement and Testing, Improvement of Teaching, Secondary Schooling, and Revitalization of Urban Education. The appendix of selected publications in that document contains 31 items, but only one has a rural focus, Public Education in Sparsely Populated Areas of the United States by Jonathan P. Sher.

There are a few completed and ongoing studies that might be expected to include good rural data: The Compensatory Education Study, the Improving Rural Education Study, and the Vocational Education Study. It is worthwhile to comment briefly on them.

The first was the Compensatory Education Study, completed in 1977. The "Title I Funds Allocation" portion of that research contains both intriguing statements in the text and a disappointing lack of specific supporting data in the tables of the appendices:

> Suburban areas receive over 11% more, and central cities 15% more, than nonmetropolitan areas. Large central cities receive 18% more per formula-eligible child than do rural nonmetropolitan areas. Compared with the national average of $193 per formula-eligible

child, large central cities receive 109% of the average; and rural non-metropolitan areas, 92% (NIE, Title I Funds Allocation, 1977).

There is also the observation that "the largest beneficiaries in terms of allocations per formula-eligible child are large central cities and suburbs in the Northeast" (NIE, 1977).

While it is gratifying to have the summary data, it is disappointing to turn to the tabular information in the appendices and find that no more comprehensive data are given. One cannot find state by state data on central cities, suburbs, and nonmetropolitan areas. Nor can one find race data by type of community. Thus the information given does not allow fine discrimination or lead to much understanding of the diversity of rural places, including race and income differences.

It was a characteristic feature of the reports within the Compensatory Education Study to omit or obscure the information on rural students. Those missing data are attributable in part to the fact that reports were not always designed to show differences by type of residence and partly, perhaps, to an initial failure to conceive of the rural sector as meriting special attention.

The National Institute of Education has, to date, mounted two major studies of rural education: The Experimental Schools Evaluation (conducted by ABT Associates) and the Improving Rural Education Study, which is now ongoing. A third planned study, one on vocational education, will give some attention to rural school districts. That study is currently in the early stages of design and implementation.

NIE is currently supporting a study that will doubtless be welcomed by rural educators and policymakers at all levels, the set of case studies called Improving Rural Education: Past Efforts, Future Opportunities. The research, being conducted under the direction of Dr. Paul Nachtigal, Director of the Rural Education Project in Colorado, is examining both externally-initiated changes in rural districts (the larger portion) and locally-initiated changes (a smaller accompanying set of studies). The major portion of the study examines a number of change strategies in particular rural contexts; the National Diffusion Network, Rural Leadership Training, Rural Teacher Corps, Rural Teacher Centers, Teacher Education, and the Experimental Schools Project are among them. The smaller studies, which are being conducted by Tom Gjelten, consultant to ECS and the National Rural Center, examine issues in school consolidation, community development, and rural curriculum innovations. The working paper for the design of this study alludes specifically to the "difficulties and the potential of rural improvement" and cites the following as one of its purposes: "to gain a deeper understanding of rural America's schools and communities, the problems that confront them, the ways of improving their capacity to attack those problems" (Nachtigal, 1978).

Because of the study's depth and its analytical approach, the published results should prove valuable to those concerned with efforts to improve rural schools. It should be noted, however, that a rural schools study of this magnitude is lamentably rare at the federal level; one hopes that it will be the herald for a new era in rural education research.

A forthcoming NIE study (fall, 1981) has potential significance for the rural data base. In the Education Amendments of 1976, the U.S. Congress has mandated the National Institute of Education to examine provisions for vocational education services within the United States. To date, that mandate has resulted in two NIE decisions about the rural sector: (1) A separate piece, albeit a "comparatively modest one," will focus on the vocational offerings of selected rural school districts. (2) Several components within the study will include rural districts within the comprehensive national overview. It seems likely that NIE's sample will pick up some schools in districts having fewer than 300 students, for it is being designed to sample institutions, rather than districts, within states. We hope that NIE will take every advantage of this opportunity to examine services available to rural districts and the manner in which they are being delivered.

Bureau of the Census

Census data are the most comprehensive source of information that we have. Through its decennial census and annual Current Population Survey, the Bureau makes available some very useful, though limited, information on rural education. Many of these data are reported in summary form in each year's Statistical Abstracts, which also includes data from other federal sources.

Each decennial census results in comprehensive population data; these are supplemented with CPS reports, which occasionally give attention

to rural matters within broad topical categories. Examples are the regular issues on education attainment and migration trends. From the Census reports it is possible to obtain some information on rural school enrollment and student attainment. It is not possible, however, to get information on school and program characteristics, school personnel, attainment by type and size of school, or costs for different types of rural schools (Fratoe, 1979).

A particular aspect of Census data is very important for rural education and related data in that it provides data on each county in the country, allowing interested agencies (e.g., the Department of Agriculture) to develop comprehensive individual and national portraits of counties that are built on selected indicators. The county as unit of analysis, however, makes it difficult to merge Census data with NCES data, where the unit of analysis is the school district.

Department of Labor

A researcher or a policymaker concerned about rural education might reasonably turn to Department of Labor information as a source of information on rural youth participation in the workforce and to find out how many rural youths have access to various manpower training programs. Unfortunately, anyone who uses DOL's more significant publications may seek long to find little.

The most significant comprehensive annual publication is probably the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Handbook. The latest edition (1977 data) has a wealth of information on SMSA's and "all metro areas." Out of 160 tables, however, there are only 8 that report detailed nonmetro

information, Tables 125 - 133. Because of metro/nonmetro divisions, one may find much gross information in the nonmetro category. A comparative examination of what is available in the metro category, however, reveals that numerous details of urban work force participation are available in reported form.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes information of general relevance to education, including the Occupational Outlook Quarterly, which is intended for an audience of employment and vocational guidance counselors, as well as persons planning careers. It gives information on employment trends in non-technical language. The Monthly Labor Review is a more technical and comprehensive publication that reports on current labor conditions. It also compiles information for a Handbook of Labor Statistics. In the reviews, primary data are often collected on the rural work force as well as other groups -- though they are not always reported. Two short reports in a recent Monthly Labor Review have featured rural employment or its limitations.

BLS has no regular series of reports on the rural work force and rural education, nor has it in at least the past two years published a special report on this issue.

Department of Agriculture

It may seem strange that some of the more systematic reporting on rural education or related conditions comes from the Department of Agriculture's ESCS Division, which publishes a series of Rural Development

Research Reports. A recent report (fall 1978) is one of the more complete analyses of what is known to characterize rural education and what is needed in the way of further information. In that report, Rural Education and the Rural Labor Force, Frank Fratoe has noted both the problems of insufficient rural education data and the problems with definitions (e.g., rural and nonmetro) and merging of data (school district with county). The report manages, however, to pull out some essential facts about rural education at this time, including problems of rural poverty, inadequate services, and achievement/attainment patterns.

Another Rural Development Research Report, planned to appear in the spring of 1979, also promises to be useful. Tentatively titled Indicators of Social Well Being for U.S. Counties (Ross, Bluestone, and Hines), the report's purpose is to develop indicators as specified in the title. Using data from the 1970 Census and Vital Statistics sources, it will report on four dimensions of well being: SES, health, family, and alienation.

Although the Department of Agriculture, then, does not collect primary quantitative data on rural education, it does tend to utilize existing data sources in compiling composite portraits and interpretive reports.

Congressional Information Sources

Congressional Research Service

In recent years, the CRS has produced one report on rural education. The paper, entitled Report on Rural America: Educational Problems and Federal Alternatives, was written by Paul M. Irwin in September, 1976. It gives a comprehensive overview of the federal role in rural schooling

and notes the difficulty of assessing the situation because of the unavailability of data. CRS has told us that another paper on rural education is "in the works" and may be available in the spring of 1979.

General Accounting Office

The GAO is a major source of information for the Congress of the United States. In the form of Reports to the Congress, it responds to congressional needs and requests for information. In addition, GAO publishes a congressional sourcebook, Federal Information Sources and Systems. That document gives the following description of the purpose of GAO collection and reporting procedures:

> ...the GAO has established a continuing program to maintain a current inventory of ecurring reports, evaluation studies, and fiscal, budgetary, and program-related sources and systems ....
>
> In developing and maintaining such files, we aspire toward a capability which ultimately shall allow us to select independent budgetary, fiscal, and program data and relate them together to disclose different and perhaps new perspectives for a given program, issue or activity (Havens and Crowther, 1976).

Among the education categories on which information is reported are adult (basic and continuing) education, vocational education, career education, elementary education, secondary education, drug education, libraries, Indian education, migrant education, handicapped education, Upward Bound, student financial aid, construction activity, and veterans' education. The fact that rural education as a special issue is not listed is significant once more, because we already know that it is not likely to be

built in as a significant variable in the data aggregated on the categories enumerated in the Sourcebook.

Another aspect of GAO activities should be mentioned, the special reports and evaluations written for the Congress. In issues published during the past three years, at least, we can find no coverage of rural education; nor has rural education been given significant attention within the reports. GAO has, for example, provided analyses and recommendations on the Experimental Schools Program (4/27/76); Bilingual Education (5/19/76); The National Assessment of Educational Progress (7/20/76); Criteria for Awarding Grants for School Desegregation (1/20/78); and Oversight and Evaluation of Selected Elementary and Secondary Education Programs (7/25/78). These reports do not include a "new perspective" on rural education as an "issue or activity."

Federally Supported Information Sources

The Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS)

In terms of breadth and scope of topics, ERIC/CRESS is the most comprehensive information source on rural education that we have, and indeed was designed to be so. As a clearinghouse, it is a central source for documents on rural education and journals that may feature rural education or related topics. According to the most recent bibliography of abstracts (Rural Education, 1977), the system indexes articles on approximately 200 topics.

In the past, ERIC/CRESS has prepared a number of bibliographies on special topics, including one on rural women. It has also commissioned

a number of special reports on aspects of rural education, e.g., pre-service programs for rural education personnel and rural schools in relation to rural development. Under the guidance of a director, and with direction from NIE and advice from its Advisory Council, ERIC/CRESS each year determines priorities and establishes the major activities to be undertaken.

In the past, the major problem with ERIC/CRESS has resulted from its greatest strength, its comprehensive nature. Possibly because of the fact that it is federally funded, the Clearinghouse seems to take pains not to be seen as "biased." This apparent posture has resulted in a tendency to underemphasize analytical needs in rural education.

The Clearinghouse, of course, is not a collector of quantitative data; it is not that sort of analysis one might look for in the system. It might be useful, however, if in the future ERIC/CRESS could give greater attention to identifying "watershed" issues and to anticipating important future trends. It might also be advisable to "cull" the entries to a greater degree, or at least to develop a system for identifying the more substantial analytical and interpretive entries. There is also a need for synthesis of some of the better studies on important issues.

A positive feature of the system is that its staff work with a number of groups engaged in producing rural information, e.g., the Rural Sociological Society and the SASS group within it. This is the type of coordinated effort that should be intensified, with a view toward providing greater specificity about rural education needs and the type of studies likely to produce the information.

Finally, ERIC/CRESS has commissioned a particular report that promises to provide a very useful analysis of one of the most significant trends now affecting rural schools, the problem of rapidly increasing population in some communities. As described by its author, this document will be the kind of report one would like to encourage ERIC/CRESS to continue to produce in the future.

The report, titled Impacts of the Rural Turnaround on Rural Education, (Ross and Green, forthcoming 1979) is to be a piece of exploratory research intended to ascertain consequences of rapid population growth on rural social institutions, particularly education. It will consider "effects of the turnaround on the education sector of communities and on rural areas experiencing drastic and rapid influx of population" (Ross and Green, 1979). The research will, it is hoped, "identify short-run and long-run impacts of rapid growth on two selected schools representing prototypes," i.e., rapid growth caused by economic factors (energy) and that caused by the back-to-the-land movement (Ross and Greene).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress

NAEP has been collecting data on U.S. student performance since 1969. It reports performance for several ages of students in science, writing, citizenship, reading, literature, music, social studies, and mathematics. Unfortunately, however, NAEP fails to use common definitions of rural or nonmetro. Instead, it reports student performance for "small places," "low metropolitan," and "extreme rural." According to a congressional research report, the category of "small places" contains "just over 30 percent of the total population and probably

includes the majority of nonmetropolitan children" (Paul Irwin, Report on Rural America: Educational Problems and Federal Alternatives, 1976). Once again, the problem arises that, in the absence of commonly used definitions for rural, research designers are free to be capricious in their use of demographic terms.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion to be drawn from preceding discussions of rural education information needs and current information sources is that the chasm is both wide (due to lack of coverage) and deep (due to lack of analysis). When reporting the findings or results of any study, it is prudent to use the language of restraint. With that maxim in mind, we can only conclude that the current status of available rural education data in federal agencies is simply astonishing. To start out on any search is to become very frustrated because (a) the information on the rural variable will not be reported; or (b) it will not be reported as a unit of analysis that compares with units in other agencies; or (c) the definitions pertaining to rural will not be comparable across the data generated by different federal agencies.

We do not believe that there is anything necessitating this condition, that it need not, in fact, be a given condition peculiar to rural education. We have, in fact, speculated in earlier sections of this paper on reasons for the lack of data.

At this point, we would like to put forth some general recommendations for generating an adequate data base on rural education. Some of these recommendations are major and comprehensive, but it should be emphasized that one-third of the nation's school children constitute a major constituency that should not be invisible at the federal level.

The final question, then, is a "druthers" one: What would we like if we could have our druthers? The answer has five parts.

FIRST, we would like for all federal agencies involved in collecting education and related data to redesign samples and studies to provide for systematic collection of data on rural populations (general and student) and on rural schools, school staffs, and education finance. We would especially like the next decennial census to include a survey of rural school districts:

> A census of the approximately 12,000 rural (nonmetro) school districts in the nation would generate information not presently available about critical areas of rural education, including student educational behavior and performance, curricula and the scope of educational programs, teacher and support staff qualification, and opinions from school administrators about major problems in rural education (Fratoe correspondence, 1979).

SECOND, we would like for the same federal agencies to merge their data under one umbrella and make the translations necessary to get comparability of data:

> A [h] . . . alternative would be the establishment of a national rural data bank which would merge socio-economic information obtained by the Census Bureau with education data obtained by NCES. However, since the former is classified by county and the latter by school district, considerable editing and reclassification of the data are required. A national rural data bank would be a valuable research tool for determining the interrelationships of education and socio-economic aspects of rural life (Fratoe, 1979).

THIRD, we recommend that there be (for example) a National Center for Rural Education Studies, to be housed within the Education Division of DHEW, probably in ASE or in NIE which, as the comprehensive research arm of federal education, has most direct responsibility for studies on all aspects of American education. Ideally, a Rural Education Studies Center would have close and formal relationships with NCES, which we hope will become the "umbrella" for rural data.

FOURTH, we advocate the compilation and publication of a rural information digest that would cover the waterfront nationally by reporting "the bare facts" on rural populations, schools and students, extent of poverty, work force participation, and the like. This digest could conceivably result from cooperative endeavors between NIE and NCES, particularly if the first two "druthers" were to be accommodated.

FIFTH, we would like to see a federal education policy of encouragement for local data-gathering activities. It is essential for particular states and localities to have local data from which to work "upward;" as essential as comprehensive national rural data are, nothing can replace the need for local information in local settings. Nor, indeed, may one hope to have a comprehensive national picture that does not include a provision for building information up from the bottom. The other aporoach, of trying to look down (as through a narrowing tunnel) at local needs from the perspective of gross national data, simply "fuzzes" the picture at the bottom.

The task, then, is large and challenging but not impossible, given the will to make such changes in policy as will result in the production of needed rural education information. Nor is the responsibility for such a change a monolithic one. We believe that the Congress should act legislatively to encourage needed changes, but we also believe that federal agencies charged with responsibility for generating information on rural education and related matters should take the initiative to make known their desire to address this need. We believe they should, when necessary, make a case to Congress regarding the need for information and their capability to help meet the need.

These, then, are the steps that we see as desirable for beginning a comprehensive effort to rectify conditions of prior neglect of rural education at the federal level. Such a correction could, of course, be accommodated in other ways; we do not claim to have thought of all possibilities. There does seem, however, to be a minimum condition of need. At the very least, there is warranted some congressional direction to federal agencies charged with collecting education and related data. Perhaps the Congress could commission the General Accounting Office to undertake such a study. And also, at the least, the National Center for Education Statistics should begin to include the smallest rural schools in its samples and begin incorporation of "rural" as a significant demographic variable when reporting data on national facts or trends in education.

The time for lamenting prior inadequacies and for decrying prior policies should have passed. The task ahead is to begin rectifying prior neglect by redirecting federal efforts in such a fashion that rural schools are no longer excluded from routine data collection, and rendered, thereby, invisible or "imaginary."

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