DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 202 RC 014 598

AUTHOR Helge, Doris
TITLE The State of the Art of Rural Special Education.
INSTITUTION Murray State Univ., KY. Dept. of Special Education.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 37p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Rural Project (NRP), Murray State University, Doran House, 1603 Hamilton Ave., Murray, KY 42071 ($5.00).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Characteristics; *Cooperation; Definitions; *Delivery Systems; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Mobility; Models; Policy Formation; *Rural Areas; Rural Education; Rural Environment; *Rural Urban Differences; *Special Education
IDENTIFIERS Public Law 94 142

ABSTRACT

The rural special education context is unique because of the distinct environment and the variety of rural school subcultures. However, little information about rural special education is available prior to the late 1970's, partially because federal agencies lacked a working definition of "rural." Although rural and urban special education service environments vary greatly (especially in personnel turnover, transportation, community structure, geography, students served, communication, teacher qualifications, and resource availability), urban service delivery models historically have been recommended and unsuccessfully applied to rural schools. A study of special education services in 75 rural districts and cooperatives in 17 states shows significant improvements in the programs and services offered and in the types, ages, and numbers of students served after implementation of PL94-142. However, major service delivery problems remain in the areas of funding, staffing, teacher certification, and preservice education. In addition to reducing resistance to change, special education collaboratives can help solve rural service delivery problems by offering cost savings through shared staff, programs, and resources. However, collaboratives must be carefully operated; successful strategies will involve decentralized services, staff roles that emphasize networking, and clearly established goals and responsibilities. The report concludes with 13 recommendations for rural special education policy. (SB)

The State Of The Art Of Rural Special Education

Doris Helge, Ph.D.
Director
National Rural Research Project
Murray State University
Murray, KY 42071

August, 1983

THE STATE OF THE ART OF RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Doris Helge, Ph.D.
Director
National Rural Research Project
Murray State University
Murray, KY 42071

August, 1983

ABSTRACT

Rural schools comprise the majority of the nation's school systems and are extremely diverse. Although tremendous improvements in service delivery have occurred since the implementation of PL94-142, considerable problems remain. This article provides an overview of improvements, remaining challenges, and current functioning. The need for quality research regarding rural special education is addressed as are problems with current research trends. Differences between rural and urban service delivery systems and the role of rural special education collaboratives are discussed. Policy recommendations are offered for national and state policy makers.

THE STATE OF THE ART OF RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Two-thirds of the nation's schools and one-third of its school-children are located in rural America. With the decline in school consolidation and the current population shift to non-metropolitan areas (Naisbitt, 1982), rural schools will continue to play a significant role in the future educational development of a large segment of our society.

This article provides an overview of the current functioning of rural school systems as they attempt to serve students with disabilities. Its conclusions are based on analysis of numerous studies conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, including those of the National Rural Research Project (NRP).

A comprehensive literature review was also conducted and position papers of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) were accessed. The article summarizes: (1) the uniqueness of the rural special education context, (2) the diversity within America's rural schools, (3) the impact of inconsistent definitions of "rural" on evaluations of service delivery, (4) a working definition of "rural," (5) the need for quality rural special education research, (6) differences in rural and urban service delivery environments, (7) a status report on rural special education service delivery, (8) a status report on rural special education collaboratives, and (9) rural special education policy recommendations.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

Rural schools experience distinct educational environments and have unique strengths and weaknesses. For example, rural areas have much higher poverty levels than non-rural areas, and rural schools serve greater percentages of handicapped children. Even though rural populations are increasing, their tax bases are not. Rural schools contribute greater percentages of their local resources for education. However, rural services cost more than similar services in urban areas because of expensive factors including transportation requirements necessary in remote/sparsely populated areas and scarce professional resources available. On the positive side, rural America still has a relatively high trust factor, close family ties, and a "sense of community." In fact, rural citizens still evidence a willingness to volunteer to help those with disabilities.

THE DIVERSITY WITHIN AMERICA'S RURAL SCHOOLS

Rural school subcultures vary tremendously (e.g., geographically from remote islands and deserts to clustered communities; economically from stable classic farm communities to depressed lower socioeconomic settings and high growth "boom or bust" communities). The array of rural schools ranges from obviously isolated schools including 1-10 children in a location 350 miles from the nearest school district to schools located in small clustered towns or surrounded by other small districts.

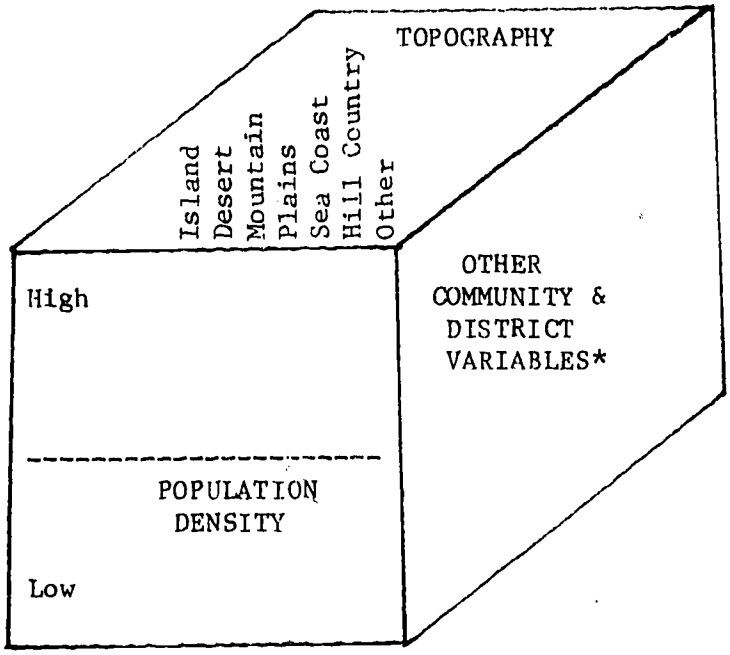
The problems of serving a cerebral palsied child in a remote area with no physical, occupational, or speech therapist, and where 250 miles exist between that child and the next cerebral palsied child are quite

different than problems encountered in a more clustered rural area where the chief barrier to service delivery is administrative apathy. Obviously, location has tremendous implications for proximity to resources -- especially highly specialized services such as physical or occupational therapy.

Figure 1 below may be helpful in conceptualizing the diversity of rural America's school systems Each of the variables listed has individual ramifications for service delivery. For example, the administrative structure has implications for securing extra-school resources; it is typically easier for a district that is part of a cooperative to obtain the services of an occupational therapist than it is for a single isolated district.

Figure 1

DIMENSIONS OF THE DIVERSITY OF RURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS



*Other Community and District Variables are listed below.

*Other Community and District Variables:

1. District administrative structure (single district, member of cooperative/collaborative structure, or BIA school)
2. Geographic barriers to services
3. Ethnic groups represented in community
4. Major religions practiced
5. Languages spoken in community
6. Socioeconomic groups represented; Degree of poverty
7. Average age of residents
8. Prevalence of various disabilities
9. Climatic variables of community that affect travel
10. Community services and other resources available
11. Distances to services that are unavailable locally
12. History of community attitudes regarding individuals with disabilities
13. History of special education services
14. Community communication and power structures
15. Degree to which district collaborates with other agencies
16. Transient student populations present (e.g., migrant or military)
17. Degree of support from state education agency and other relevant agencies
18. Degree to which the community values education
19. Average daily attendance

. . . N

The dimensions of topography and population density are relatively simple and are illustrated by Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

POPULATION DENSITY

Topography	High (e.g., clustered small towns)	Low (e.g., remote locations)
Island		
Desert		
Mountain		
Plains		
Sea coast		
Hill country		
Other		

As depicted in Figure 1, two key variables of service delivery are population density (e.g., are there an adequate number of students with a given disability so that a district can "afford" to hire a specialist for such children) and topography (e.g., does a mountain with untraversable roads at certain times of the year inhibit transportation of services to students). Interaction of these two dimensions with the "other community and district variables" dimension further individualizes a district. Change in any variable in any of the three dimensions further differentiates a given community from others. Because this is an open model (note that after number 19 of the "other variables" is . . .N), the number of possible types of rural communities is infinite. In fact, the National Rural Research Project catalogued over 300 combinations when conducting on-site visits during 1978-82.

THE IMPACT OF INCONSISTENT DEFINITIONS OF "RURAL" ON EVALUATIONS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

One of the most significant obstacles to thoroughly assessing the effectiveness of rural special education services has been the absence of a consistently applied definition of "rural" among federal agencies, educators, and professional organizations. The inadequacies of data available to compare rural and urban districts may be partially attributed to the problem of defining rural education.

Most federal agencies have no definition or requirements for gathering data with regard to rural performance versus non-rural performance. Data on rural schools collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) have frequently been summarized with data

from large school districts. Furthermore, data have been considered unimportant and completely deleted for districts which enroll under 300 students. This has occurred in spite of the fact that 25% of the operating public school districts in the U.S. enroll fewer than 300 students each (Williams and Warf, 1978). The NCES did not initiate processes to report data on districts with fewer than 300 students until March of 1983.

The inclination of many data-gathering bodies has been to define "rural" solely by using population figures. Unfortunately, various data collection agencies and studies have used different definitions in studying rural school populations, depending on the types of data being collected, the purposes for data collection, and staff and resources available.

A common definition has been to define a rural school district as one having fewer than 1,000 students, although figures as high as 2,500 have frequently been used. Population-based definitions of "rural" inadvertently include non-rural districts. For example, if the local education agency (LEA) being classified is a large county school district, it may have a larger enrollment than 1,000 or even 2,500 but still be very rural because of the sparsity of its population. In addition, strictly defining a rural district as fewer than 1,000 or even 2,500 students may inadvertently include suburban areas. One may readily ascertain some of the potential problems when special education cooperatives are being considered. This is particularly true because of the historical emphasis on consolidation of rural districts. A population per square mile definition is more functional even though total geographic square miles may differ.

ONE WORKING DEFINITION OF "RURAL"

The following definition is based on a modified census definition and consideration of the tremendous diversity in rural schools and communities across the U.S. (Illustrated by Figure 1). The definition was used in 1978-83 research projects funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (SEP) and conducted by the NRP. (The research initially involved on-site work with over 100 school districts and special education cooperatives. Subsequent investigations involved an additional 200 rural districts/cooperatives across the country.) While it is only one of many definitions of rural, it has proven functional.

> A district is considered rural when the number of inhabitants is fewer than 150 per square mile or when located in counties with 60% or more of the population living in communities no larger than 5,000 inhabitants. Districts with more than 10,000 students and those within a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau, are not considered rural.

Use of this definition by a research project does not exclude larger districts from potentially benefiting from project outcomes. Rather, it attempts to ensure that findings will be relevant for those that are within the parameters of the definition. For example, NRP research from 1978-81 in 100 school districts involved identifying effective service delivery strategies appropriate for specific types of rural subcultures. To prevent the automatic assumption that a strategy would be viable in a similar subculture because it had been effectively used by an LEA/cooperative with parallel characteristics, districts were paired by those that were effectively implementing Public Law 94-142 (PL94-142) and those that were not. Thus, strategies that had been

found to be effective in an upper functioning district but failed in another district with similar community and district variables were discarded from the core of "potentially disseminable strategies."

THE NEED FOR QUALITY RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

Partially because of the problems outlined above with defining "rural," little data collection occurred concerning rural education or rural special education until the late 1970's. Urban service delivery models have historically been recommended and unsuccessfully applied to rural schools. Practices successful in one specific type of rural subculture have also been transported, without adaptation, to other rural subcultures and have failed.

Recent research studies funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (SEP) have clearly indicated that rural special education service delivery strategies must be individually designed. (Helge, 1981.) It is also critical that research projects have a well-structured definition of "rural" rather than stating, as have some recent studies, "you'll know when you're there because it will feel rural."

Studies are emerging that do not clearly differentiate between rural and non-rural schools nor among different types of ruralness yet draw conclusions and make meaningless comparisons and policy recommendations. This is not helpful to the field. Regardless of what specific definition is adopted, it is essential to have a consistent frame of reference before educators can feel comfortable noting and confronting "exceptions to the rule."

The field should also be wary of "studies" sampling a small population of rural schools and making broad-ranging generalizations or, worse

yet, futuristic prophesies and policy recommendations. Competent researchers explain their attempts to obtain adequate samples, discuss the limitations of their studies and outline further research that is needed. It is only then that limited conclusions are offered, based on evidence to date and with no legitimate claim for generalizability of the conclusions.

The interest in rural special education is burgeoning. Numerous studies are proclaiming to have discovered "the" rural model. Others are investigating districts and generalizing to cooperatives, or vice versa. Practitioners and personnel preparation programs will not benefit by studies that involve inappropriate generalizations. Although the "last word" at the Federal level has yet to be spoken on the definition of "rural," and national research with adequate sampling that clearly differentiates rural subcultures is relatively expensive, it is essential.

DIFFERENCES IN RURAL AND URBAN SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE ENVIRONMENTS

For purposes of this discussion, "urban" will be defined as:

> an area having an incorporated city with at least 2,500 inhabitants or a city within a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. (National Center for Education Statistics)

Whereas "rural" lacks a common definition among federal agencies, the above definition of "urban" is fairly consistently used.

There are at least two important caveats in comparing rural and urban communities and school systems. (1) Even rural communities with the same population numbers, densities, etc., vary tremendously because of the variety of community subcultures they contain. (2) Because of

the controversies over the definitions of rural and urban, it is useful to think of rural and urban characteristics as being on a continuum.

Issues differentiating rural and urban school systems as they attempt to serve special education populations are listed in Table I below.

Table I

ISSUES DIFFERENTIATING RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS
AS THEY SERVE THE HANDICAPPED

Issues	Rural	Urban
Percent of School Districts	Two-thirds (67%) of all school districts are classified as rural.	One-third (33%) of school districts are classified as metropolitan.
Personnel Turnover	Turnover is commonly 30-50% among specialized personnel such as speech, physical, and occupational therapists. Turnover is especially serious among itinerant personnel serving low-incidence populations.	Turnover more commonly involves superintendents and special education directors (i.e., management personnel). Teacher turnover is less than in rural schools.
Transportation	Long distances are frequently involved in Long distances are a problem in planning and implementing interagency collaboration. High costs are associated with transportation. Climatic and geographic barriers to travel exist (e.g., mountains; deserts; icy, muddy roads; flooding seasons; blizzards; and snow storms)	Problems of transportation logistics primarily evolve around desegregation issues or which agency or bureaucratic structure is to pay for transportation.
Community Structure	A sense of "community spirit" prevalent. A personalized environment prevails	The environment is depersonalized except within inner-city pockets of distinctive ethnic groups (several of which may be incorporated into any one school system.)
Geography	Problems posed by remote areas include social and professional isolation, long distances from services, and geographic barriers (e.g., mountains, deserts, islands).	Logistics of the city itself often pose problems (e.g., negotiating transportation transfers - particularly for wheelchairs)

Table I (Continued)

Issues	Rural	Urban
Difficulties in serving specific disabilities	Low-incidence handicaps are hardest to serve. Integration of mildly/moderately handicapped students is more acceptable than in urban schools.	The presence of adequate numbers of "low-incidence" handicapped children typically allow students to be clustered for services or for a specialist to be hired. The urban environment is frequently not attitudinally as conducive to acceptance of mainstreamed mildly/moderately handicapped students as in rural schools.
Backlog of children for testing and placement	The backlog is the result of the lack of available services (specialized personnel, agency programs, funds, etc.).	The backlog results from bureaucratic and organizational barriers.
Communication	Communication is mainly person to person.	Written memos are frequently used.
Student Body Composition	Small numbers of handicapped students in diverse ethnic and linguistic groups pose difficulties for establishing "programs" for bilingual or multicultural students. Difficulties exist in serving migrant handicapped students because of the low numbers of students present and few appropriate resources available. Qualified bilingual and multicultural personnel are difficult to recruit to rural areas. Appropriate materials and other resources are typically unavailable or inappropriate for rural communities. Religious minorities are frequently strong subcultures in rural America.	Urban areas typically have a wide variety of ethnic and racial groups. Open student populations pose challenges and service delivery complexities, but comprehensive multicultural programs are feasible.

Table I (Continued)

Issues	Rural	
›ach of Relevant ‹tional Professionals	Generalists are needed to perform a variety of tasks and teach a variety of ages, handicapping conditions, and subjects.	Specia on one disabi
‹nt Problems Reported ‹achers	Lack of educational goals and relatively low values for formal education contribute to poor motivation.	Discip
‹ability of Techni- ‹esources	Advanced technologies are less available than in urban schools, particularly for student use.	Modern rural by stu
‹er Qualifications	Rural schools are frequently forced to hire unqualified personnel via "temporary" certifications.	Specia advanc zation
›nnel recruitment ‹etention problems	These are more serious for rural than urban schools and are related to low salary levels, social and professional isolation, lack of career ladders, long distances to travel, and conservatism of rural communities.	There teache are re crime,
‹s of funding and ‹y inequities	Rural "advocates" are fewer in numbers and therefore less vocal. Sparse populations facilitate policies ignoring rural problems.	Separa create mechan quate city m clout urban

A STATUS REPORT ON RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY

A study involving seventy-five school districts and cooperatives in 17 states was commissioned by the SEP for the purpose of comparing services to rural handicapped students before and after the implementation of PL94-142. (Helge, 1980.)

The sampled districts/cooperatives were selected for geographic, cultural and socioeconomic representativeness. State education agencies (SEAs) had been requested to select LEAs/cooperatives with widely variant performance regarding PL94-142 implementation. Two-day on-site visits occurred in each district involving interviews with persons at all levels of the organization. Follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone to gain additional information and detect divergent responses during "crisis" and routine periods. Consistencies and discrepancies between SEA and LEA responses were also noted.

The sampled districts and cooperatives exhibited significant improvements in programs and services offered and in the types and ages of handicapped students served. Achievements included a 92% average increase in the number of handicapped students identified and served since the passage of PL94-142.

Table II indicates the percentages of the districts sampled having various services before and after the implementation of PL94-142. Column 3 of Table III indicates the percentage of change in available services before and after implementation.

Percentages of change in the number of districts providing services before and after implementation of PL94-142 ranged up to 1,525%. In a majority of the rural schools sampled, services such as physical and occupational therapy and progams for severely handicapped students were

in place for the first time. Procedures for due process, parental involvement procedures, and individualized educational programs (IEPs) had been established.

Table II

PERCENTAGE OF CHANGES IN AVAILABILITY OF SERVICES BEFORE AND AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PL94-142 IN RURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS
(n = 75 districts and cooperatives)

	BEFORE PL 94-142	AFTER PL 94-142	PERCENT CHANGE
NO SERVICES FOR ANY HANDICAPPED STUDENTS	05%	0%	-100%*
NO SERVICES FOR SEVERELY HANDICAPPED STUDENTS	09%	01%	- 88%*
NO SERVICES FOR 16-21 YEAR OLD HANDICAPPED STUDENTS	27%	01%	- 96%*
NO HEALTH SERVICES	19%	0%	-100%
SERVICES FOR 3-4 YEAR OLDS	07%	63%	+743%*
SERVICES FOR 19-20 YEAR OLDS	36%	72%	+100%*
SERVICES FOR MULTI-HANDICAPPED	0%	47%	**
SERVICES FOR PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED	07%	47%	+571%*
SERVICES FOR VISUALLY HANDICAPPED	17%	57%	+235%*
SERVICES FOR EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED	09%	52%	+478%*
SERVICES FOR HEARING IMPAIRED	25%	60%	+140%*
SERVICES FOR LEARNING DISABLED	27%	79%	+193%*

*Significant at the .05 Level
**Increase Infinite; Statistic Cannot be Calculated

(Helge, 1980.)

In spite of the progress identified in Table II, the sampled districts and cooperatives expressed major problems implementing PL94-142. These included difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff, resistance to change, the need for staff development, long distances between schools and services, cultural differences, geographic barriers, transportation and funding inadequacies, problems providing support services, and problems with interpreting PL94-142 regulations in rural areas. These reported difficulties affected district abilities to ensure procedural safeguard requirements, and to otherwise fully implement PL94-142.

AN UPDATE REGARDING RURAL SERVICE DELIVERY PROBLEMS

In January, 1983, a telephone survey was conducted to gather original data and to update 1978-82 NRP studies funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs. A total of 200 special education administrators from 200 rural local school systems and cooperatives in all 50 states (4 from each state) were involved in this survey designed to provide a state-of-the-art synopsis of facets of rural special education service delivery. Respondents also included representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) rural schools. (Helge, 1983.)

Respondents were representative of various rural economies, population densities, and types of organizational structures. The study covered topics including service delivery problems and effective strategies, personnel needs, certification problems, strengths and weaknesses of rural special educator personnel preparation programs, and emerging technologies related to programs for rural handicapped students. For

brevity, an overview of some of the more significant findings will be reported in this article.

1. Major Problems Identified

Table III below illustrates major problems identifed by respondents when asked to state in rank order the greatest problems faced by their districts/cooperatives as they attempted to serve rural students with handicaps.

Table III

MAJOR PROBLEMS IN SERVING RURAL HANDICAPPED STUDENTS
n = 200

PROBLEM	PERCENT
Funding Inadequacies	74%
Difficulties Recruiting Qualified Staff	56%
Difficulties Retaining Qualified Staff	%
Transportation Inadequacies	6
Providing Services to Low-Incidence Handicapped Populations	52%
Need for Staff Development	50%
Resistance to Change	46%
Providing Support Services	44%
Negative Attitudes of School Personnel and Communities Toward Handicapped Students	42%
Long Distances Between Schools and Services	42%
Involving Parents	40%
Professional Isolation	40%
Climatic Problems and Marginal Roads	32%
Problems of Geographic Terrain	32%
Cultural Differences	32%
Difficulties Involved in Serving Transient Populations	28%
Post-High School Services	26%
Inadequate Facilities	20%
Foster Care Inadequacies	18%
Planning Difficulties Because of "Boom or Bust" Economies and Populations	16%
Interagency Collaboration	8%
Housing Inadequacies	8%

Major service delivery problems identified in this study were relatively consistent with those found in the National Comparative Study (1980) funded by the SEP. The major noteworthy differences were increases in the percentages of respondents naming funding inadequacies (up from 56% to 74%), transportation inadequacies (up from 34% to 60%), and difficulties providing services to low-incidence handicapped populations (up from 39% to 52%).

Respondents indicated that the following factors were primarily responsible for these significant increases: (a) fiscal inflation; (b) increased numbers of handicapped students identified and served (a 92% increase before and after implementation of PL94-142); (c) a sufficient period of time elapsing since initiation of PL94-142 to determine services needed and to experiment with provisions of the IEP; and (d) tremendous revenue shortfalls and other funding problems experienced by numerous states and impoverished rural communities. These appeared to be most directly responsible for increased funding problems.

2. Personnel Needs

Respondents were asked, "What special education and supportive positions are most needed in your district but are nonexistent, unfilled, or not funded (cut back because funding for a position was rescinded)." Table IV indicates responses to this question.

Table IV

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND SUPPORT POSITIONS NEEDED BUT NON-EXISTENT, UNFILLED, OR NOT FUNDED (CUT BACK)
n = 200
(Each entry reports the percentages of the total number of respondents with a given response.)

	Non-Existent	Unfilled	Not Funded	Average
Social Worker	10%	3%	16%	9%
Guidance Counselor/ Therapist	6%	0%	0%	2%
Psychologist	10%	0%	6%	5%
Vocational Education Teacher	3%	0%	6%	3%
Vocational Rehabilitation Staff	0%	0%	3%	1%
Occupational Therapist	3%	10%	17%	10%
Physical Therapist	6%	27%	23%	19%
Speech Pathologist/Language Therapist	3%	23%	17%	15%
Audiologist	0%	0%	3%	1%
Hearing Impaired Teacher	0%	3%	0%	1%
Learning Disabilities Teacher	12%	10%	10%	11%
Teacher of the Emotionally Disturbed	3%	6%	6%	5%
Resource Room Teacher	0%	6%	0%	2%
Teacher of the Gifted	0%	3%	6%	3%
Nurse	3%	0%	3%	1%
Low-Incidence/Itinerant Personnel	3%	17%	20%	13%
Teacher of Trainable Mentally Retarded	3%	0%	3%	2%
Paraprofessionals	0%	0%	3%	1%
Preschool Teachers	0%	0%	6%	2%
Adaptive P.E. Teacher	0%	0%	3%	1%
Personnel Adequate	NA	NA	NA	17%

Respondents generally reported that low-incidence/itinerant positions (including physical, occupational, and speech therapists) were most often needed but did not exist. Personnel recruitment and retention problems (noted to be a major problem by 66% and 64%, respectively, of those sampled) were directly related to the descriptions of special education and support personnel needed. Only 17% of the districts/cooperatives surveyed related that they had an adequate number of special education personnel. An increasing concern of the SEP

has been that standards for hiring rural personnel have been lower than standards in non-rural areas. The data from this study corroborated this concern (e.g., 92% of the respondents reported that emergency certification was "available and frequently used"). Respondents also stated that temporarily certified personnel were not well qualified for their positions.

3. Effects of Teacher Certification Guidelines on Rural Special Education Programs

The majority of the respondents (59%) in the above study related that certification guidelines were too specialized for rural programs. An example relates to the fact that most states mandate that one or more areas of specialization occur in training. The LEA respondents felt that such a requirement was inappropriate for service in rural areas which typically involves working with a variety of low-incidence handicapping conditions.

In fact, numerous states have initiated certification requirements responsive to rural service delivery problems, and many are investigating how they may be more responsive to rural service problems.

4. Inadequacies of Preservice Training

Teacher training institutions generally do not consider special rural needs and circumstances when designing training programs. The vast majority (97%) of respondents stated that they had not been trained specifically for work with rural handicapped students. Only 10% described their preservice training as adequate for their work in rural communities. Respondents felt particularly strong about the need for generalizable/non-categorical skills because most rural special educators work with a variety of handicaps and have few specialists available.

5. Anticipated Future Problems

Inadequate funding and problems with recruitment and retention of qualified personnel were as prominent in future projections (a concern of 80% of the respondents) as they were in currently identified problems. Respondents anticipated that future political actions would prove inequitable for rural special education and were anxious about the effects of emerging technologies. For example, interviewees were concerned about ethical issues of technology, lack of money to secure equipment, and the speed of technological developments. They also expressed concern regarding the inequitable distribution of advanced technologies.

A STATUS REPORT ON RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES

Collaborative structures facilitating the delivery of special education services have existed for decades. These include (1) state-mandated special district systems and education service agencies; (2) cooperatives formed by local district initiation; (3) regional or decentralized state education agency systems providing no direct services; and (4) other inter-organizational structures including district contracts with private or community agencies, cooperative:cooperative or cooperative:LEA agreements, inter-state collaboratives, and other unique arrangements. Most of these structures were not specifically designed so that students with disabilities could be served although some, such as the education service districts in Texas, were designed with rural and regional service needs in mind.

Because of the requirement in the Federal Regulations for PL94-142 that districts request a minimum of $7,500 in flow-through monies from SEAs, special education cooperatives have mushroomed since 1975. These structures vary tremendously in governance systems and in geographic scope, but most were designed to ameliorate the difficulties of providing a continuum of services in rural schools. Of particular concern were problems serving students with low-incidence disabilities.

Collaboratives of all types offer opportunities for cost savings via shared staff, programs, staff development, and other resources. Collaboratives offer local rural districts the benefits of joining together for services but maintaining the benefits of small schools. These benefits typically include a great deal of autonomy regarding how services are provided.

In fact, collaboratives also frequently reduce the degree of resistance to change in rural districts, when administrators, teachers, and members of the community meet together in discussions of shared problems and when the public is appropriately involved in decision-making. To this extent, collaborative structures tend to increase accountability to students with disabilities and their families. In collaboratives where interaction with clients and communities is a scarce commodity, client accountability is decreased.

NRP research has also identified a number of concerns about the operation of collaboratives. Some are briefly discussed below.

1. Goal displacement occurs when an emphasis on cost efficiency becomes the overriding goal of an administrative structure and individual child needs are placed at a lower priority level. A caveat seems to be necessary in maintaining foci on the true purposes of the collaborative.

2. Cumbersome bureaucratic layers and political structures designed with the intention of facilitating services can isolate the student needing services from them and unnecessarily involve service providers in political battles. The involvement of multiple governing boards (within each LEA and for the collaborative as a whole) is usually cumbersome. For example, planning is difficult in structures in which budget figures are not available until just prior to the new year because each year means new decisions at the LEA level regarding the extent of involvement for the new year. This kind of operation inhibits recruitment of new staff and planning in general.

3. The separate fiscal status of LEAs and the collaborative can cause instability for the local district. This is particularly true when the collaborative requires the LEA to purchase services. The types of services offered, their quality, or the program emphasis may be changed for financial reasons rather than on a needs basis.

4. Adequate consideration must be given to establishing effective relationships between the collaborative and each district in regular as well as special education matters. This includes lines of accountability of all personnel hired by the collaborative to work with some or all districts involved. For example, it is wise to discuss guidelines for dividing service time for collab-

orative personnel among various duties and districts at an early stage. Some collaboratives find it effective to allocate district costs for the collaborative staff on the basis of the amount of time in service delivery in that particular district, and other districts prefer that staff be paid on an equally split basis, no matter where services were delivered. Such operational philosophies are best decided when the structure is initiated.

5. Many collaborative personnel are concerned with the abilities of shared personnel to cover vast distances effectively, such as extremes of 24,000 square miles and entire islands. Many special education supervisory staff hired by the collaboratives are unable to have impact on special education staff working with their districts. They either have no hiring input or no control over staff actions, as many special education personnel were deemed to be accountable to the building principal once they entered his/her building.

6. Many staff hired by the collaborative are concerned that district personnel abrogate their responsibilities toward the handicapped by allocating all responsibility for handicapped students to the collaborative. They feel a need for better education and commitment of district personnel in understanding their roles in complying with PL94-142. The ultimate source of responsibility for services is frequently difficult to determine.

7. Program specialists, such as itinerant teachers, experience particular difficulties becoming accepted by district staff who frequently do not understand their roles; withstanding grueling travel schedules, frequently in inclement weather; and operating in less than adequate facilities reserved for the "part-time staff member." This staff member, who also typically functions with considerable role ambiguity, is subject to "burnout" or, at best, job dissatisfaction.

8. Accountability systems are frequently difficult to detect, and informal systems often differ dramatically from those of the formal organizational chart.

9. Parent involvement and communication becomes more and more difficult as services are removed further from the local school building. Situations requiring child travel to a centralized service facility inadvertently exclude many parents from participation with the child's program or teacher.

10. The quality of services is often inconsistent across units of a collaborative because of variations in staff competency and staff development programs.

11. Hidden agendas are prolific in collaboratives because each district feels ultimately responsible to his/her local community. True change across a collaborative is difficult in the midst of competing local priorities.

As futuristic trends indicate more networking and interagency collaboration (Naisbitt, 1982), the field can expect the use of collaboratives for rural special education purposes to increase. Successful strategies will include: (1) those that involve decentralization of services whenever possible, involving real delegation of authority as well as responsibility and emphasizing local ownership and commitment; (2) creation of staff roles that emphasize networking to accomplish service delivery; (3) clearly established goals, policies, accountability systems, and staff job descriptions; (4) responsibility for regular as well as special education aspects of service delivery, whenever practical; (5) realistic perspectives regarding interagency collaboration and district motivations to become involved; (6) open agenda setting; (7) creation of local support for change across the collaborative so that local agendas do not conflict with those of the collaborative; and (8) allowing for divergent goals of each unit of the collaborative.

RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered to national policy makers who have impact upon rural special education service delivery systems. They are based on analyses of numerous studies funded by the SEP, including those referenced above, and a comprehensive literature review. They also draw upon literature and position papers of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES), including its 1983 response to the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

1. The Federal government should adopt and use a consistent definition of "rural." This would facilitate accurate and efficient data collection by Federal and state agencies.

2. The Federal government should mandate routine data collection at the Federal and state levels regarding the quality of rural special education. Such data collection should include information differentiating rural and non-rural funding and educational quality.

3. National and state policy makers should assess the data collected regarding differences in the quality of rural and non-rural special education services and in funding equitability. Comprehensive plans should be developed to ameliorate identified problems.

4. The Federal government should enhance its commitment to Public Law 94-142 and its implementation in rural America. Adequate funding levels should be initiated and maintained for serving rural students with disabilities.

5. National policy makers should recognize the diversity of rural subcultures. This should culminate in the recognition that the implementation of Public Law 94-142 (i.e., enactment of the Federal Regulations) will be different in rural than in non-rural areas and that each rural subculture will require unique problem-solving strategies.

6. Requirements in the Federal Regulations for Public Law 94-142 should be analyzed regarding areas that should be interpreted/enacted differently in specific rural subcultures. An example would entail analysis of how the requirement to obtain written parental permission for certain testing/services should be enacted differently in rural cultures that have no written language.

7. Federal and state governments should provide support for innovative teacher training problems addressing areas of critical personnel shortages in rural special education. Federal support should encourage collaborative efforts between state education agencies and universities designed to determine positions and types of personnel needed and to devise appropriate personnel preparation programs. Universities should be encouraged to advise students of career opportunities in areas of critical personnel shortages.

8. National and state policy makers should investigate the development of career ladders designed to recruit and retain quality rural special education personnel. Career ladders should become part of national systems designed to link available positons and applicants so that career

ladders are not limited to positions available in the immediate rural area.

9. National and state policy makers should address certification issues and the problems they pose for rural school systems. They should support assessments of when generic vs. specialized personnel are most effective and analyze appropriate uses of paraprofessionals.

10. Federal and state governments should directly and indirectly support comprehensive inservice training programs addressing critical needs of rural service delivery programs. This support should be designed to assist staff development in inadequately financed rural school systems with extraordinary high teacher turnover rates.

11. National and State policy makers should support investigation and information dissemination concerning alternate service delivery systems that are effective and, when possible, cost efficient.

12. National and state policy makers should continuously support the investigation of technological alternatives for instruction and instructional support, mangement, and staff development applications for rural special education. Strategies emphasizing cost savings and alternatives for securing services should be accentuated.

13. National and state policy makers should develop programs to motivate corporate gifts to rural schools of technological hardware, software, and inservice training.

SUMMARY

This article has provided a brief overview of the state-of-the-art of special education in rural America. The uniqueness of the rural service environment and the diversity of rural schools were stressed. The relationship between inconsistent definitions of "rural" at the Federal level and inadequate data for rural service delivery planning was discussed. The need for quality research regarding rural special education delivery systems was emphasized, and problems with current studies having inadequate samples and definitions of "rural" were addressed. The article included information regarding differences between rural and urban special education service environments and a discussion

of collaborative structures designed to facilitate the delivery of rural special education services. Policy recommendations for Federal and state governments and national and state-level policy makers followed a status report on rural special education service delivery systems.

REFERENCES

Helge, D.I. National research identifying problems in implementing comprehensive special education programming in rural areas. Exceptional Children, April, 1981, 47 (7), pp. 514-520.

Helge, D.I. A national comparative study regarding rural special education service delivery systems before and after passage of PL 94-142. National Rural Research Project, Center for Innovation and Delivery, Murray, KY, 1980, 158 pp.

Helge, D.I. Images: Issues and trends in rural special education - January, 1983. National Rural Research Project, Center for Innovation and Development, Murray, KY, 1981, 86 pp.

Helge, D.I. The state-of-the-art of rural special education: A Pre-service Curriculum Module. National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project, Center for Innovation and Development, Murray, KY, 1983, 83 pp.

Naisbitt, J. Megatrends. Ten new directions transforming our lives. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1982.

Sontag, E., and Button, J. Office of Special Education breifing paper. February, 1980.

U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Education Directory: Public School Systems, 1977-78. by Jeffrey W. Williams and Sallie L. Warf. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C.: Covernment Printing Office, 1978.