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**ABSTRACT**

To develop a list of research priorities for rural education, members of the Rural Education Association's (REA) Research Committee and Executive Board were asked to rank order nine thematic research categories. The ranking process resulted in the following list (starting with the highest priority): (1) rural school effectiveness; (2) staff development and professional support; (3) curriculum and instruction; (4) taxonomy of rural education; (5) federal, state, and local policies impacting rural schools and communities; (6) rural school finance; (7) school district governance and organization; (8) assessment of rural school assumptions; and (9) role of the school in rural development. Comprehensive data is lacking in virtually all these areas, suggesting the need for a balance in research across the entire agenda. The dearth of empirical studies on rural education is so broad as to beckon inquiry from university-based researchers, government agencies, professional organizations, and educators at the school level. The end result of research should be data and analysis that will help policy makers reach informed decisions about complex issues. Interest in rural education is growing, but it is unlikely to reach its full potential until a comprehensive and inclusive research literature on education in a rural setting is forthcoming. (JHZ)

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NATIONAL RURAL EDUCATION RESEARCH AGENDA

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A Report Submitted  
to the  
Interagency Committee on Rural Education  
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## NATIONAL RURAL EDUCATION RESEARCH AGENDA

In October 1983 at the 75th Annual Conference of the Rural Education Association held in Manhattan, Kansas, Dr. Robert Worthington, Assistant Secretary for Adult and Vocational Education, announced the U.S. Department of Education's "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980's." In addition to the announcement that rural education would receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance and funds provided by the Department of Education, the policy indicated that the data base and research base for rural education would be expanded. It also noted that the Department of Education would include the Rural Education Association (REA) among those organizations through which information would be disseminated.

Consistent with the Federal policy, it is appropriate that the REA submit to the Department its recommendations for a national rural education research agenda. In so doing, the REA recognizes the present absence of a comprehensive and inclusive body of research literature on rural schools. Furthermore, this lack of information represents a major obstacle to the furtherance of rural interests at a time when the potential for fundamental change in rural education policy is perhaps the greatest in recent history. It is imperative that immediate attention be given to closing the research gap that presently exists in the field.

### A Proposed Agenda for Rural Education Research

At the request of the REA Executive Board, the organization's Research Committee was asked to formulate a research agenda for consideration by the Department of Education's Interagency Committee on Rural Education. Nine major themes, focusing on research needs, emerged from a review of the

literature on rural schools. Each theme was presented to members of the Research Committee and the Executive Board. These individuals represent a cross-section from over 20 different states of experts on rural education in the university community, the federal government, the state offices of education, educational service units, and teachers and administrators in rural schools. Members were asked to rank order the themes from "1" to "9" with "1" being the highest priority. At the conclusion of the ranking process, the point value for each theme was tallied. The theme with the lowest point value was ranked number one, the second number two, and so on. The prioritization of themes is depicted in Figure 1, as is the average point value for each.

Figure 1. Prioritization of Research Themes

<u>Ranking</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Mean Point Value</u>
1	Rural School Effectiveness	2.4
2	Staff Development and Professional Support	4.2
3	Curriculum and Instruction	4.3
4	Taxonomy of Rural Education	5.2
5	Federal, State, and Local Policies Impacting Rural Schools and Communities	5.3
6	Rural School Finance	5.4
7	School District Governance and Organization	5.5
8	Assessment of Rural School Assumptions	5.8
9	Role of the School in Rural Development	6.6

### Explanation of the Themes

It is not suggested that these themes encompass all the research needs for rural education. Nor that they serve as the sine qua non for research in rural education. It is felt, however, that they establish the major areas in which research should be focused. Moreover, data collected in these areas will provide policy makers with needed information to knowledgeably affect rural schools' improvement.

The themes are sufficiently broad as to incorporate most topics related to a study of the field. No attempt is made in this report to identify the innumerable topics that might fall within these nine major categories. The Appendix does provide a list of sample topics beneath each theme. Their purpose is to clarify the research intent associated with the respective theme and to act as a catalyst in spawning related research topics. Undoubtedly, exhaustive lists could be developed for each theme. The task of compiling, modifying, updating, and prioritizing such lists, however, should be left to individual researchers making inquiry into the field. It is also recognized that some topics might categorically fall beneath more than one theme.

### Conclusion

An examination of theme prioritization reveals only minimal disparity in the ranking of several of the themes. Comprehensive data is lacking in virtually all these areas, suggesting the need for a balance in research across the entire agenda. The research conducted should include designs which employ traditional methodologies associated with sound educational research such as experimental, descriptive, historical, developmental, or

correlational type studies.

Conduct of rural education research does not fall within the domain of any one institutional structure or organization. The dearth of empirical studies on rural education is so broad as to beckon inquiry from university based researchers, research units within governmental agencies, research units within professional organizations, spontaneous research or innovation initiated at the school level by educators, and from others interested in the study of rural and small schools.

Finally, the end result of research should be to provide the policy making community with data and analysis for decision making. Policy makers are typically a lay audience. They expect an analysis that is capable of explaining complex issues and that lays out options in communicative ways. These individuals usually realize there are no easy answers, but they do want and expect clear choices. Avenues for dissemination of research findings in rural education must be clearly identified so that policy makers are able to move from the realm of ideas to the arena of action.

The momentum of interest in rural education is building in this country. It is unlikely, however, that this momentum will reach its full potential until a comprehensive and inclusive research literature on education in a rural setting is forthcoming. The rural education research agenda presented in this report is intended as an effort to keep the momentum building.

## APPENDIX

Listed in priority order in this Appendix are those themes which comprise the Rural Education Association's national rural education research agenda. A thematic approach was adopted in order to organize the multitude of research topics requiring investigation. Listed beneath each theme are several research topics. A more complete listing of detailed topics will certainly evolve as rural education practitioners organize and plan their research within these thematic categories.

### 1- RURAL SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

- Assessment of student achievement in rural schools
- Characteristics of effective rural schools (as viewed from both elementary and secondary perspectives)
- Characteristics of effective leadership in rural schools (as viewed from both elementary and secondary perspectives)
- Strategies which capitalize on the strengths of small schools and seek to correct the deficiencies
- Successful practices/programs in rural schools at both the elementary and secondary level that can be replicated
- Strategies to meet the needs of special populations in rural areas (eg., minorities, special education, etc.)
- Etc.

### 2- STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

- Strategies for the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel
- The development of staff inservice training programs to meet the needs of rural teachers
- Determine how technology can best be used as a means of conducting useful staff inservice
- Identify and develop preservice training needs of prospective rural teachers (eg., multiple certification, alternative training models, field based experience, etc.)
- Assess needs of administrators and support staff in dealing with problems such as professional isolation, limited staffing, professional development, curriculum development, etc..
- Etc.

### 3 - CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

- Successful methodologies and practices which increase the effectiveness of the instructional program and student learning in small and/or multi-grade classrooms
- Curricular needs in rural schools which enhance rural development as well as meet the needs of those students who plan to leave the rural community and those who elect to stay
- Advancing technologies as a way to improve content and breadth of instruction for basic, special, and vocational education
- Strategies which enhance and broaden curricular offerings in small high schools
- Etc.

### 4 - TAXONOMY OF RURAL EDUCATION

- Determine what constitutes a rural school
- Characteristics of rural schools as perceived at national, regional, state, and local levels
- Classification of rural schools by (a) size, (b) geographic region, (c) degree of remoteness and/or isolation, (d) etc.
- Demographic make-up of students who attend rural schools
- Determine where America's rural schools are located
- Identify definitions of rural, remote, isolated and small schools at national, regional, state, and local levels
- Differences between rural and urban schools
- Etc.

### 5 - FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL POLICIES IMPACTING RURAL SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

- Analysis of federal legislation and education policies on rural schools
- Analysis of state legislation and policies on rural schools
- Impact of educational reform movements, blue ribbon commissions, etc. (federal, state, and local) on rural schools
- Strategies to increase awareness for rural education within state offices of education
- Etc.



## 6 - RURAL SCHOOL FINANCE

- Strategies to stabilize revenue while operating on a small tax base
- Distribution, utilization, and effects of federal and state education funds in rural schools and districts
- Ways to equalize salary levels and other employment benefits for rural teachers in comparison to salary and benefits awarded urban teachers
- Financial implications of major enrollment shifts in rural schools
- Politics of school finance in rural communities
- Creation of new revenue sources and alternative funding formulas for rural schools
- Assess economic impact to rural schools of changes in the agriculture community (eg., decreased farm property evaluation, setbacks in agriculture production, etc.)
- Etc.

## 7 - SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATION

- Effects of consolidation on rural schools, rural children, and rural communities
- Determine the economic, educational, and social effects of class, school, and district size and structure in rural communities
- Evaluation of the role and/or contribution of educational service centers in rural areas
- Organizational implications of major enrollment shifts in rural schools
- Politics of school and district organization in rural America
- Alternatives to school district consolidation
- Strategies to improve efficiency in organization and administration of rural schools
- Determine ways to promote parent and community involvement in the education process of rural youngsters
- Etc.

## 8 - ASSESSMENT OF RURAL SCHOOL ASSUMPTIONS

- Support for claims that rural schools are superior because of individualized instruction, greater community involvement, local control, etc.
- Assess strengths and weaknesses commonly associated with rural schools
- The role of the community and its effect on rural education
- Assessment of the rural school, community, and family in meeting the socialization needs of rural youth
- Etc.

## 9 - ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

- Economic impact of school closure on the rural community.
- The school's role in helping to facilitate manpower needs in the rural community
- The school as an economic multiplier in the area
- Use of the school facility for purposes other than education of young people
- Position and significance of the school in shaping the image of the rural community
- Use of the school as a mechanism to promote rural development
- Etc.