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ABSTRACT

This theme issue on rural education focuses on the unique characteristics and problems of rural schools, and discusses how the "top down" and "one size fits all" nature of the last decade of reforms has not taken these into account. To better address the situation of rural and small schools, various strategies are offered that involve distance learning, interagency collaboration, role of rural teacher, specific programs that are working, and a "bottom-up" approach. This issue contains the following articles: (1) "Rural Education: What are the Barriers to School Reform?" (Paul Nachtigal); (2) "Rural School Concerns Get Attention of Congress" (Joe Newlin); (3) "Distance Learning Provides Link for Rural Schools" (interview with Jim Mecklenburger); (4) "Do School Choice Plans Ignore Rural School Needs?" (Dori Nielson); (5) "Minnesota District Models Interagency Collaboration" (Sherry Freeland Walker); (6) "Rural Teachers Play Critical Role in Education Reform" (David Leo-Nyquist); (7) "Teaching in Appalachia Illustrates Extreme of Rural Problems" (Christine Morgenweck); (8) "Rural Schools Work on 'Bottom-Up' Change" (Jacqueline D. Spears); (9) "Rural Schools Lead Reform Effort in Alabama" (Jack Shelton); (10) "A Portrait of Rural Schools"; and (11) "ECS Helping States Bring Rural Schools into Reform Effort" (Chris Pipho). Contains photographs. (TD)

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Theme Issue on Rural Education

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Education Commission of the States

Volume 12
Number 2
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Rural school concerns are getting the attention of Congress, which is dealing with two bills that, among other things, will help rural districts undertake reform, better prepare graduates, recruit teachers and use advanced technologies in the classroom. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Rural school concerns get attention of Congress

by Joe Newlin

"Approximately 60% of our country's public school districts are rural districts. The schools in these districts and the children they serve face difficult problems:

- Approximately one of every four of America's rural children lives below the poverty line.
- The average rural school is more than 45 years old and in disrepair.
- Rural preschoolers have less access to early childhood programs than other children.
- Rural schools face far greater teacher shortages than do others.
- A declining number of rural high school graduates are pursuing postsecondary education opportunities."

So noted Congressman Pat Williams of Montana as he introduced the Rural Schools of America Act into the House of Representatives last April. The act is one of

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Don't underestimate the problem of school reform because the rural school is today in a state of arrested development, bedeviled by education traditions, lacking in effective supervision, controlled largely by rural people, who, too often, do not realize either their own needs or the possibilities of rural education, and taught by teachers who, generally speaking, have but little comprehension of this rural-life problem. The task of reorganizing and redirecting rural education is difficult and will necessarily be slow.

— Ellwood P. Cubberly (education leader), 1914

Rural people don't understand very well what is happening in the global and national economy that is playing out to their disadvantage in their communities. These rural people are disconnected institutionally. They are disconnected in a number of other ways, and they just don't have easy access. They are remote from understanding the things that are affecting their future, and that is important.

— Kenneth Deavers (agricultural economist), 1992

Rural education: What are the barriers to school reform?

by Paul Nachtigal

School reform is not new to rural education. In fact, rural schools have either been reformed or under threat to be reformed since school consolidation became the public policy of choice to address the "rural school problem." Such policy is usually mandated, usually accomplished in spite of strong local opposition and often results in years of bad feelings that get played out in local political arenas.

As a one-time member of a state department of education, it was clear to me that when new educational policy was initiated or accreditation standards imposed that were purported to improve educational quality, the rural schools were the first to feel the pressure. It is no secret that frequently such actions on the part of the state are thinly veiled efforts to further reduce the number of small rural schools. With this history, it is little wonder that when one

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IN THIS ISSUE

Distance learning provides link for rural schools

Editor's note: In the following interview, Jim Mecklenburger talks about technology and rural schools. He is president of the Mecklenburger Group, a coalition of independent technology consultants based in Alexandria, Virginia.

Q. How did distance learning develop?

A. In 1986 or 1987, the TI-IN Network began in Texas as a private/public partnership offering live courses with a teacher in a studio. A number of other enterprises began shortly afterwards, also based on the premise that you could teach live, using satellite for delivering one-way television — you could watch the teacher but feedback was by phone.

At the same time, other efforts were using "lower tech," i.e., they contained little or no video. Louisiana's network remains the biggest with about 100 schools hooked into a graphic screen or electronic chalkboard. Other higher-tech systems include two-way video with TV cameras at all sites. Those systems tend to be installations by school systems or partnerships such as university and feeder schools. The most notable example is Fibernet 2000 in Mississippi, which connects two universities, the state education department, some high schools and a corrections facility.

Q. Is satellite for distance learning losing ground to other technologies?

A. Technologies employed in the nam of distance learning have never included just satellite, although the term came into being around satellite technology and has grown enormously using satellite. Many people satisfy the same purposes with other technologies, ranging from low-tech and inexpensive means such as radio and microwave to high-tech like fiber optics. It doesn't matter which system is used; the choice depends on convenience, price, availability, etc.

Q. How many states have organized efforts at distance learning?

A. Virtually every state has something going on called distance learning. Some efforts are quite substantial, organized and funded by the state. Some networks are established. Multi-state networks such as TI-IN reach almost every state. Because most of the country is rural, more of the technological uses may be in rural schools. The early efforts at distance learning were in rural, small, isolated sites. Now many are in urban sites. The pattern emerging is that distance learning will always have a niche in rural America, but now it is every place.

Q. What are schools doing with technology?

A. The question that arises is always, "Should we do courses of instruction via technology?" The first efforts at this resulted in "talking-head" television; some of that still goes on. Other uses include Electronic Field Trips, pioneered by the Fairfax County, Virginia, schools, or debates, seminars and political gatherings such as those done by the Massachusetts Corporation for Educational Telecommunications.

Does distance learning in schools have to be classroom-like with teachers and students connected? Probably, but it doesn't have to be "real time" like most people think. Teachers can put material on the system and students can pull up the information when they're ready. This application is not used too much yet, but it opens up the relationship between teacher and students; it allows people to work individually and get back together on the network. When one gets into the array of technology and uses, you can think of combining technique and technology.

Q. What are the biggest problems with technology in education?

A. The two most obvious relate to change of any kind: Who will pay? How do we get started? These are two enormous hurdles, especially if one is indisposed to change. School people tend to look for new money rather than at how to reallocate funds. Technology is becoming another option for providing services, whether people choose to invest in it is a question of priority.

Q. What steps are being taken to ensure certification of teachers who teach via technology?

A. Schools of education generally are outside the technological phenomenon, with very few exceptions. There may be some discussion of technological training in the '90s, but for now there is a disjuncture between the ways we train and certify teachers and new ways of instruction facilitated by technology.

Almost without exception, school systems at the leading edge of technology have become trainers of their own people. There are hundreds of school systems where someone is responsible for technology, usually at the assistant superintendent level, where they have access to budget, planning, etc. In these cases, you find staff development, recruiting, maintenance. The problem in rural areas is that that kind of administrative structure is not in place.

Q. What other technological issues come up in rural schools?

A. One issue that affects rural areas especially is the traditional role of the rural school as the center of the community or the major enterprise. With technology, this can be enhanced. Technology raises questions about the relationship of the school to community. Does it provide a new opportunity for schools to serve their community? Is the school the place

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The 1994 ECS National Forum and Annual Meeting, scheduled July 6-9 in Honolulu, will feature demonstrations of distance-learning efforts. If you're interested in showing what you're doing to policy makers and education leaders from around the country and the Pacific Rim, please contact Christie McElhinney at 303-299-3695.

Technology applications in rural schools range from computers in the classroom to high-tech two-way video systems

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Do school choice plans ignore rural school needs?

by Dori Nielson

In 1989, President Bush called the nation's governors to Charlottesville to discuss education and change. One of the major topics was open enrollment or school choice. Three years later, 34 states were involved in legislative activity relating to this issue.

Several rural states have been involved in those discussions, including one of the most distinctly rural states, Montana. Montana is the fourth largest state geographically, but is only 44th in population. That combination results in only 1.09 students per square mile and 5.6 residents per square mile. More than 85% of Montana's schools are located in rural or small towns, and more than 50% of the school districts have fewer than 100 students enrolled.

Although open enrollment/choice proposals differ in detail from state to state, they have a common base. They generally allow a student to enroll in a school of choice with minimal or no cost. The plans either eliminate tuition, grant a voucher for parents to redeem at any school or provide a tax credit to parents who have school tuition costs. Most choice plans involve only public schools, but in a few instances private/nonpublic schools are included. In some cases, transportation costs are incorporated into the plans.

Effects on rural schools

Do open enrollment and other choice proposals address the concerns of the nation's rural states? How do the claims commonly made by proponents for open enrollment/choice affect rural students?

CLAIM: School choice allows parents to make choices about education.

- The typical choices available to many rural school districts, especially in a state such as Montana, are a one-room school 20 miles away, maybe on a gravel road, or a school of approximately 50 students in a small town that's 45 miles away (and the first 25 are not paved). During much of the winter, the roads may be impassable.

CLAIM: School choice offers equal opportunity for poor children.

- The poorer the parent, the less likely the parent can make a choice that will cost money. The distances between families and schools in rural areas mean that few rural school choices could be exercised without increasing transportation costs, either to the school district or the parents.

Critics of school choice plans question whether such plans discriminate against rural students, whose only "choice" may be a school 20 miles away that offers the same courses as his or her current school. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

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Distance learning provides link for rural schools

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to locate resources or are there things happening elsewhere that are taking advantage of electronic media that ought to be connected to the school? It's a little easier in rural settings to get agencies to collaborate, but the question is how the community gets its act together and whether schools lead, collaborate or follow.

Q. How can technology help with efforts to improve interagency collaboration in rural areas?

A. Technology is sometimes a catalyst for collaboration because it turns out that services can be rendered better, more comprehensively, more easily or more cheaply if people get their act together. You could, for example, organize to deliver information about the school and its programs, using a "homework hotline" model. Then it turns out that people in six other community agencies, such as the hospital, the city, the police, like the idea and want to join in, creating one communication system to all families. This approach makes good — it most likely doesn't change chnology, it saves money; it ts collaboration.

Another kind of model suggests that welfare people have one set of problems, medical people another and school people another, and they all operate each in their own agencies to solve the problems. If a solution to any given problem is a voice-mail system, a cable television channel, a special-service-on-the-phone system or a new cellular communication system, for example, it makes sense, when a community is going to be spending the kind of money required, to consider multiple-agency use if not multiple-agency planning and coordination prior to use. The fact that technology is available and somebody is thinking about using it may cause everyone to decide they ought to work together.

Q. Are there caveats to using technology for collaborative efforts?

A. One aspect to all of this is that frequently the catalytic agent in bringing people together is the vendor of the technology or maybe even a regulatory agency that has oversight over the technologies. The reality is that the cost is high, the technology "service to everyone" capability is obvious, and it is in the interest of the vendor to get a number of communities excited. If the community people are smart, they won't just look at one technology; they will look at several and make some hard decisions between them.

On the other hand, the drive for collaboration via technology creates the capacity for external political forces — such as governors and legislators and regulatory commissions — to see the prospect of collaboration and decide, for instance, that no agency gets a planning grant for technology unless they are talking to other agencies.

You could flip the issue the other way and say, "Well, if people are planning collaborations around some sort of service, they ought to go looking for a technology component to what they are doing." My guess is it more often will go the other way. That is, the technology will either be the catalyst or the occasion for prompting people to work together who otherwise have not had sufficient reason to do so ★

Cable giant filling teacher training gap

A major cable television company is stepping in to provide the technological training that teachers need.

Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI) is opening a new national training facility to help teachers learn how to use advanced video and computer technologies in their schools. The facility, scheduled to open in November, has national satellite uplink capabilities to reach teachers nationwide. It also will be connected to Denver-area schools to allow teachers there to observe master teachers using new learning tools.

In addition, TCI will use the facility to determine the most effective ways of linking cable resources with other technologies such as laser discs and CD-ROM systems.

For more information, contact TCI Education Project, P.O. Box 5630, Denver, CO 80217-5630 ★

What are the barriers to school reform?

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more wave of school reform comes rolling across the country, rural schools and rural communities view it with skepticism.

The first barrier that needs to be addressed is reducing the "siege mentality" resulting from past policy initiatives designed to solve the rural school problem. Accomplishing this will depend on policy makers accepting the fact that rural education will continue to be a part of the education scene in America and that young people must not be geographically disadvantaged because of their parent's choice of residence. True rural reform will come only when we replace the current "siege mentality" with a supportive climate in which rural schools can explore creative options to improving education that build on the strengths of small scale and the culture and traditions of rural communities.

Nature of reform

A second barrier that stands in the way of rural school reform is the nature of the reform itself. Current reform efforts are primarily concerned with fine tuning the existing mass-production factory model of education in which rural schools, by their very definition, are considered to be "second best." For instance, the first wave of the post-*A Nation at Risk* reform efforts called for more advanced course offerings and better prepared teachers, changes that made additional demands upon already stretched resources available to rural schools and represented another set of top-down mandates.

Current reform efforts make demands that rural schools find hard to fulfill. (Photo by Harris)

One response to these demands was to look to various forms of distance learning, using satellite or interactive video networks, to provide the additional courses. In some cases this was a useful option, but hardly the cure-all it was advertised to be. Generally, when distance learning is embedded in the current system, it contributes to preserving the status quo rather than encouraging more powerful approaches to teaching and learning.

The second wave of reform was less concerned with additions to the educational program and more concerned with how the program was carried out. The reforms being promoted were emerging from research on "effective schools" and included characteristics such as high expectations; safe, positive climate for learning; good leadership, time-on-task.

Implementing the characteristics of effective schools is not related to school size as were the earlier demands of more course offerings, and in fact the effective schools characteristics, in general, could more easily be achieved in small-scale institutions. Again, however, good rural schools could say, "Look, we have all those characteristics in place. We are an effective school, leave us alone."

Skepticism valid

The current wave of reform calls for basic restructuring of public education encouraging "break-the-mold" schools. The solution proposed for restructuring education, the engine for school reform, is standards — national standards, state standards, local standards; standards for math, standards for science, standards for social studies. Depending on how the crest of this new wave forms, it could, if one were really serious about looking at student outcomes and measuring them in a variety of ways, open the door for major restructuring. Or it could look a lot like every other mandated, top-down approach to school improvement.

Rural educators have a right to hold on to their skepticism. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act proposed in Congress requires that local districts create a set of student outcomes which are consistent with state and national goals in order to receive federal funding. Some states are following suit, implementing similar requirements for the receipt of state funding. If schools do not comply, the state can take steps to dissolve the district.

Effective schools characteristics and reforms such as "safe, positive" environment can be easily achieved in small schools. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

This looks and feels a lot like the top-down approach to reform that rural schools have experienced since the turn of the century. It is ironic that the tide of school reform continues to threaten the future of small rural schools while the successful, break-the-mold schools are incorporating many of the characteristics of rural schools, e.g., small scale and tight connections with the community which the school serves.

A special kind of assistance

Small institutions have very little slack in the system which can be devoted to rural school redesign; they cannot do it alone. Strategies and incentives will need to be created to encourage schools to work together, breaking down the isolation and providing the moral support necessary to sustain the process of school reform.

Rural school reform also requires access to outside assistance, not assistance that tells rural school people what they have to do, but rather helps them think through and implement reforms that they design. Anything less is not doing justice to the 25% of the nation's students who attend rural schools.

Summary

Within the existing climate of school reform, there is little chance that rural people can bring their expertise to bear on how their schools could more effectively serve their students and their communities. Rural people have been disempowered, they are still the "people who have been left behind." Children will continue to live in rural areas and deserve quality education. Rural people must be trusted to address their own problems.

If school reform is to be useful to rural communities, the nation must accept rural reality. Rural communities have unique needs. Small schools can and should operate differently from large urban schools. One size of school reform does not fit all. And, finally, support systems must be put in place that will enable rural schools to become true participants in the nation's school reform efforts.

Nachtigal directs the Rural Institute of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory.★

Minnesota district models interagency collaboration

by Sherry Freeland Walker

When a high school student in rural Blue Earth, Minnesota, needs assistance from the local human services agencies, he or she doesn't have to travel to town for help. The agencies come to him.

A state incentive grant is allowing a variety of county agencies to share office space in one of four high schools that were consolidated. A new replacement high school scheduled to open next fall will be home to 600-650 students as well as representatives from county human services agencies serving young people and families.

"We are trying to break down the barriers between education and human services for the benefit of kids," says Don Helmstetter, superintendent of the Blue Earth Area Public Schools and acting superintendent of the Blue Earth Area High School District. "We want to eliminate both duplication of service as well as the gaps in service."

Rural states already rank at the top in several standardized test comparisons and high school graduation rates.

Consolidated schools

The high school district was formed when the schools were merged under Minnesota's Secondary Facilities Grant Program. "Many see this grant program as an effort by the state to consolidate small schools, but that's not its intent," Helmstetter says. Rather, the grants offer an incentive to bring small rural high schools together to share resources.

Under the program, the new high school will make office space available for support services, including school counselors and representatives of such agencies as child protection, probation, public and mental health and the county attorney's office. Although the school is still under construction, the collaboration itself is under way.

Helmstetter notes there have been no turf battles among agencies, a result he attributes to the fact that agencies are charged no rent for the space and that both human services agencies and the school district recognize the need to share limited resources. "We can't continue to do things the way we have been, there has to be some risk-taking, some leaders willing to shove down walls," he stresses.

Private benefits

With students spread out over about 600 square miles, there was also a question about how accessible and "user-friendly" services were when they weren't readily available, he says. The shared space in the new school will have a separate entrance to provide a more private, less embarrassing, less demeaning place for students and their parents to meet with agency representatives.

"They won't have to see school personnel if they come in to meet with a human services representative," Helmstetter says. In addition, parents will have the opportunity to learn of services that could benefit them, such as adult education or parenting classes. "We hope to bring disenfranchised parents back into the school system by giving them a comfortable place to be."

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Do school choice plans ignore rural school needs?

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- Facilitating choice will increase transportation costs, especially in rural areas. If the district is required to provide transportation costs, the students who remain in district schools probably will have fewer funds available for instructional purposes.

CLAIM: School choice will improve school achievement because of competition among schools

- When the majority of schools are located in rural areas or small towns, schools are likely to provide similar programs. Choices to attend other schools generally are based on convenience, location where a parent works or athletic or student activities. Therefore, academic programs are not likely to be affected by school choice.
- If nonpublic schools are involved in the "competition," the rural areas become non-players because very few private schools are located in rural areas.
- Private schools are not obligated to adhere to state rules and regulations that apply to public schools, such as those governing certified teachers, reporting and accountability and educating special education students. Because the rules for public and nonpublic are not the same, it can hardly be considered competition.
- States that are very rural — Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska — already rank at the top in several standardized testing comparisons, high school completion statistics and postsecondary enrollment.

CLAIM: School choice will promote involvement of more parents in their children's education

- The further from home the children go to school, and the more the chosen school is unlike the home community, the less likely that parents will be able or willing to be involved.

CLAIM: School choice will promote voluntary desegregation.

- Rural minority students in Montana and several other western and central states are likely to be American Indian students who live on remote reservations. The next nearest school is probably another reservation school.

CLAIM: School choice will force schools to streamline bureaucracies

- Unless local school boards are considered bureaucracy, small rural schools often have almost no bureaucracy. In Montana districts, no on-site administrator is required in schools with fewer than nine professional staff.

It would appear that proponents of traditional school choice do not recognize that "choice" has many faces, and one of them is rural. Perhaps policy makers with rural constituencies should consider the choices that rural parents have advocated for generations. Those parents have supported the "choice" to keep their small rural schools open. Ask any legislator or policy maker who has advocated consolidation of small schools. Rural parents want their children to attend schools that reflect their rural culture and values and are close to home. And they want those small and often isolated schools to provide their children with educational opportunities to prepare them for the future.

Different choices

We can take people to the moon, film the surface of the moon, make phone calls from airplanes, watch two TV programs while filming a third, put the entire *Encuclopedia Britannica* on a small piece of plastic and watch wars as they happen half way around the world. Surely we can bring art history to a remote Indian reservation, Japanese language courses to a one-room school, advanced math or science courses to a high school of 50 students or the most up-to-date agricultural research to a small farming community.

We have an available choice that provided infinite possibilities for learning without moving students great distances. It's called distance-learning technology and is already providing choices in some areas.

How about a choice plan that provides a voucher for electronic equipment or distance-learning courses if parents exercise the option to keep their students in small, rural schools with minimal bureaucracy and reduced transportation costs? It's a choice! The time has come to include rural America in the "choice" debates.

Nielson is a senior education analyst for the Montana Office of Public Instruction. This article is a personal view and is not intended to represent the position of the Office of Public Instruction. ★

Rural school concerns

Continued from page 1

two federal bills introduced in support of rural education, the first time separate bills supporting rural education have been submitted to Congress. The Senate version was introduced on September 20 by Senators James Jeffords of Vermont, Paul Simon of Illinois and Paul Wellstone of Minnesota.

The act focuses directly on issues that rural educators seek to address. The legislation will help rural school districts meet the National Education Goals, undertake reform, prepare graduates for higher education and vocational training, train and recruit classroom teachers and provide early childhood development programs. It will enable rural school districts to use the most advanced telecommunications technologies for learning and also will provide funding for various work needed on rural school buildings.

In addition, both bills establish rural regional education centers to conduct research and evaluation activities important to the nation's rural areas, call for a White House Conference on Rural Education and create a rural education focus within the Executive Branch by establishing an office of the assistant secretary for rural education in the U.S. Department of Education.

The Rural Schools of America Acts of 1993 contains important and essential steps in addressing the education needs of rural America and rural children. For these children, many of them living in isolated regions, education is the only real opportunity to change their lives.

Interestingly, rural schools are doing a good job of educating young people in spite of limited resources. The National Center for Education Information recently reported that the 10 states leading the nation in academic achievement are predominately rural — Iowa, North Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Kansas and South Dakota. The center noted that six of the top states enroll more than 30% of their students in schools with fewer than 300 students.

Rural advocates say rural schools are among the nation's most effective, but lack resources for enhancing the curriculum and for providing needed services such as early childhood education. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Interestingly, rural schools are doing a good job of educating young people in spite of limited resources.

Rural Education Congress

The federal bills were among the topics at the Second National Congress on Rural Education, which took place in Burlington, Vermont, during NREA's annual meeting in October. The theme was, "How Can The Federal Government Assist Rural Schools In Meeting the Educational Goals of the Year 2000?"

More than 400 rural educators representing all 50 states discussed their views and made recommendations for federal assistance.

The rural congress began in 1992 when rural educators and supporters of rural education met in Traverse City, Michigan, to help realize one of NREA's missions — a united national voice for rural education. Findings of the congress provided a focal point for issues and concerns facing rural education and strongly supported the need for the federal government to pass the initiatives contained in the above-mentioned bills.

The congress was charged with developing a consensus statement on the serious problems afflicting rural education and with recommending solutions and strategies to correct problems in improving rural education.

The rural congress agreed upon three major points:

- **Awareness and Image.** America's rural schools are generally among the nation's most effective and, considering the relative cost, one of the country's best bargains. These attributes must be advertised and the myth dispelled that small and/or rural schools are academically inadequate compared to urban and large schools. Advocates need to orchestrate programs to substantially enhance the public image of rural education.

  Most important, rural education needs a stronger voice in national and state governments. Legislators must be convinced that rural schools are unique and must continue to exist. They need to be made aware that rural and small schools have been the well-spring of innovations in teaching, such as multi-age classrooms. Moreover, legislators need to understand that all rural children deserve educational opportunities equal to those available to students in urban and suburban districts.

- **Equity and Resources.** A commonplace problem in America's rural schools is that resources are inadequate to educate children to meet tomorrow's challenges. Such goals as those of America 2000 are ludicrous in this light. What is more, education has an urban bias. State funding programs need to address the diverse needs of rural as well as urban schools. One of these needs is support in attracting and retaining quality teachers and staff. Another is to avail isolated and/or small schools with technology for enhancing and enriching curriculum.

  Finally, legislatures must stop exacerbating the problems of rural educators by mandating educational improvement and reform programs until they can provide full funding to enable implementation, funding that makes no demands on already overstressed rural school budgets.

- **Provincialism.** Rural education leaders maintain a focus on educating for the present with methods from the past, but schools need to be designed to better prepare students for life. This means, among other things, that curricula should promote and facilitate life-long learning. School facilities should be available to the community as a whole, evenings and weekends, as well as during the regular school day. Financial assistance must be allocated to improve rural schools' infrastructure so that high-tech interactive video classes can be shared among schools and delivered from colleges, via telephone lines and satellite signals, to broaden and enrich the curriculum.

  Also, to assure appropriate change and improvement in teaching and learning, staff development must be readily available to rural, isolated school teachers and administrators via electronic telecommunications. National and state legislation must heed these needs much more adequately. Moreover, interagency collaboration should be brought to bear on the problems of provincialism, isolation and the nexus of both — limited resources.

All children deserve educational opportunities equal to those available to students in urban and suburban districts, rural advocates argue. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Legislators must be convinced that rural schools are unique and must continue to exist.

The future

Solving the challenges facing the nation's rural schools will require the concerted effort of all government levels and all community sectors. Because state and federal funding of rural schools does not adequately reflect need, NREA feels strongly that well-targeted federal funds, accompanied by flexible guidelines, and that holding educators accountable will make a significant contribution to addressing rural school needs and concerns.

Nealon is president of the National Rural Education Association, an 85 year-old national membership organization headquartered at Colorado State University. ★

Rural teachers play critical role in education reform

by David Leo-Nyquist

Editor's note. The following article is excerpted from the spring-summer 1993 issue of Country Teacher, *published by the National Rural Education Association, based at Colorado State University.*

To someone not familiar with the most promising current directions in school reform and restructuring, the attention given recently to the 10th anniversary of the publication of *A Nation at Risk* might be deceptive. While that government-sponsored report marked the beginning of a wave of highly publicized top-down, state-level reform initiatives in the mid-1980s, the most interesting recent developments have been on a much smaller scale, often involving individual schools and districts or clusters of schools organized as networks. And a significant number of schools on the cutting edge of reform are small and rural.

Until fairly recently, widespread school improvement efforts were wedded to the assumption that "bigger is better," and the century-long consolidation of small rural schools into much larger suburban- urban-sized units was a conspicuous example of this practice. Rural educators were encouraged to believe that smallness was an educational disadvantage rather than a strength. The breakdown of many large urban school systems in the last two decades, however, has challenged that assumption and prompted some farsighted urban educators (most notably in New York City and Philadelphia) to reverse the "bigness" trend.

This reversal of conventional wisdom, coupled with the current emphasis on the central role of teachers in long-term school reforms, places rural teachers in a privileged position. what we know about working with students — and with each other — in small schools may at last be valued by the educational reform movement

Rural solutions

In practical terms, what this means is that solutions to educational problems worked out in small rural schools can have great relevance for schools everywhere that now choose to reorganize themselves on a smaller scale.

Many small rural schools, because of their special circumstances (such as small scale, close connections to the community, flexibility of adult roles and high level of student participation in school activities, for example) can move rapidly in the indicated directions if they choose to do so and if they learn to take advantage of their unique conditions.

Small is beautiful. Maintaining social relationships on a small scale is an extremely important factor in personalizing the learning process and can provide the starting point in efforts at "community-building" within small schools. As our classroom approaches become more personalized and our support systems more successful in preventing our students from "falling through the cracks," rural teachers can draw freely from — and contribute to — the rich literature on student learning styles, alternative forms of grading and assessment, etc. that is accumulating across the country.

School-community connections. The strength and survival of our communities depend on strong schools. This is certainly true everywhere, but the connection is more visible and obvious in small towns and rural areas where schools are often the largest employers and schoolpeople often function as communitywide leaders. Building upon the informal friendship networks existing in most small communities, rural schools can make their school walls permeable, as students learn how to make the community into their extended classroom, and community members share their expertise and resources within classrooms.

Fostering a sense of place. Rural teachers can help to foster "community feeling" and a sense of place among their students by creating alternatives to the generic curriculum of textbooks, worksheets and commercially produced tests. What does a "place-specific" or rural curriculum look like? How can we adapt and translate curricular mandates into approaches that fit our local circumstances?

Ecological literacy. Our proximity to the natural resources upon which our nation depends allows us to give our students first-hand experiences with stewardship. "Ecological consciousness" is certainly more widely and deeply dispersed throughout the general population than it was a generation ago, especially among the young. What is our role in helping that process to continue, in fostering what Aldo Leopold called a "land ethic" among ourselves and our students? How can a more thoughtful approach to local resource management become embedded in our K-12 curriculum and impact the long-term economic viability of our rural communities?

New forms of leadership. Schools are in dire need of leadership that is something more than "management." This will involve rethinking the role of the principal, nurturing teacher leadership as it emerges and being more creative and flexible in defining our teaching roles. Many small rural schools have preserved — or could easily move toward -- a tradition of the "teaching principal," which can help break down the communication problems and adversarial relations common in large schools with more rigidly defined and specialized roles. Small schools can be trailblazers here if they can learn to respond imaginatively to the question of leadership.

Our task as rural teachers committed to reform is to sift through the resources and models available to us, recognizing the entrepreneurial panacea peddlers for what they are and adapting the most powerful and useful practices to our own unique circumstances. But even more critically, our task is to understand that the most important reforms — inspiring changes that can blaze the trail for others to follow — can and often do happen in our own classrooms and schools. We must build upon our strengths and learn to use our most obvious natural advantages wisely.

Leo-Nyquist edits Country Teacher *and teaches English at South Fork High School in Miranda, California* ★

Rural teachers interested in school reform need to sift through the resources and models available and adapt the most useful practices to their unique circumstances, advises a rural high school teacher. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Minnesota district models interagency collaboration

Continued from page 5

Helmstetter says Minnesota's confidentiality laws make it difficult for human services workers and educators to share information. To deal with this problem, the school has a Student Assistance Team, whose members meet twice a month to talk how to help students and families. Each member agrees in writing to keep all information private. In addition, the school is adding a family advocate to represent the student or family at meetings to ensure the family has an equal voice.

The immediate benefit Helmstetter sees to the program is that students will no longer be just a "number," they will get more individualized services. Over the long term, he says, the program aims to address the cycle of dependency on welfare by reaching entire families early with services that can help them succeed

For more information on Blue Earth's interagency collaboration, contact Helmstetter at 315 E. 6th Street, Blue Earth, MN 56013.

Walker is editor of the Leader ★

Teaching in Appalachia illustrates extreme of rural problems

by Christine Morgenweck

My year of teaching in Appalachia was quite an experience, one quite different from other teaching assignments in the United States. The beauty of the land was at times altogether diminished by the horrid conditions of poverty. Teaching in this region of the United States was both a rewarding and frustrating experience.

It was rewarding in that teachers were desperately needed, and most school administrators were extremely appreciative to have well-educated teachers in their schools. When I was appointed to special education in northeast Tennessee's Hawkins County, straight out of college in the mid-1970s, my supervisor and principal were grateful for any work I did and any progress students made was considered "amazing."

Among the frustrations was the fact that school supplies were almost nonexistent and had to be purchased on a $55 per-year allowance (a factor that taught me good budgeting skills). Textbooks were outdated by an average of 15 years, attendance rates were low, especially during the tobacco harvesting season, and parents did not understand the importance of school. In my 150-student K-12 school, parents believed school had not made their lives easier, so why should it make their children's lives easier?

Personally, I experienced some unique situations — having a snake wrap around my ankle during a parent/teacher visit in a home with dirt floors, watching students groom their horses and mules during lunch break, and having the seniors (all 17) take turns putting coal into the furnace to heat the building. One of my third-grade students offered me the opportunity to learn how to "chew and spit" (tobacco). I declined.

Different goals

My goals for what I could accomplish, and what I could teach my students, changed as I learned what their lives were like. For example, it was difficult getting parents and students to accept governmental help. Parents often could not read and therefore could not fill out forms for assistance such as Food Stamps. Government agencies were located some distance from the community, and many of the mountain people did not want to travel far to "be stared at."

So, my goals became to see that my students had basic reading, writing and "survival" skills that would help them, if they chose, find and qualify for assistance, and understand things such as how to prepare more nutritious meals or how to use a bank.

Finding teachers big problems

One problem facing rural schools today, as well in the '70s, is how to attract and retain teachers. This was particularly tough in Appalachia where teachers had to struggle constantly with being looked upon as an outsider and trying to break the barrier of suspicion.

A bigger problem was not being able to grow professionally. It takes perseverance to obtain an advanced degree when the nearest university may be hours away.

And, isolated rural areas such as Appalachia have an additional burden in trying to attract teachers used to culture as mainstream Americans think of it — good libraries, museums, symphonies, theaters, ballet, etc. I had to find ways to entertain myself. Even housing itself can be a problem. My apartment, an old school converted into housing units for teachers by a local principal, was 40 miles away from the school.

On the other hand, teaching in a location like Appalachia can be extremely satisfying for a teacher who is adventurous and wants to get out of mainstream America. The exposure to a challenging teaching environment and to the community itself can only help one grow in life experiences. Teaching is one way that pupils can become aware of the larger world, and it can be rewarding to acquaint them with that world, whether they choose to join it or not.

Morgenweck is currently ECS' human resources administrator ★

Some facts about rural teachers

- Nearly one in four public school teachers (about 560,000) taught in a rural school in the 1987-88 school year.
- Only 6% of teachers in rural schools were members of a minority group, compared to 12% in nonrural schools.
- Rural teachers were younger than teachers in other areas and had less experience and preparation. Some 16% were under age 30 compared to 12% elsewhere and only 17% had more than 20 years of experience, compared to 23% in nonrural areas. In secondary schools, 34% of rural teachers had at least a master's degree, compared to 46% for nonrural teachers.
- Rural teachers earned an average of approximately $4,800 less than nonrural teachers per year.
- Rural principals did not appear to have more trouble recruiting teachers than those in nonrural schools, nor was the attrition rate higher in rural areas.
- Rural teachers exercise considerable control over the instructional process in their classroom, with 88% saying they select teaching techniques, for example, and 67% saying they select content, topics and skills to be taught. By contrast, smaller proportions of rural teachers said they have "a great deal of influence" over school policy.

Taken from *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools*, forthcoming from the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (see page 15).

Attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools remains a major problem. Teachers may be discouraged by the lack of urban culture and professional development opportunities, but may find other aspects enjoyable. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Rural schools work on 'bottom-up' change

by Jacqueline D. Spears

While the most visible efforts at school reform are "top-down," rural schools in Arizona and Washington are trying their hand at change that is "bottom-up."

Funding provided by the Ford Foundation has enabled staff at the Rural Clearinghouse for Lifelong Education and Development to take a careful look at rural schools and their communities. Multicultural reform was chosen as one strategy to strengthen the link between schools and their communities.

Project EMPIRE (Exemplary Multicultural Practices in Rural Schools) was designed to build *local* networks capable of supporting locally designed projects. Each participating school formed a team that included a representative from its administration, several teachers and at least one community member. The school team became part of a "cluster" of rural schools working to initiate multicultural reform. These people became the "inside" experts.

Each group of rural schools was then linked to a network of "outside" experts. These people included faculty from the regional university (Northern Arizona University or Heritage College in south central Washington), as well as multicultural education experts from the regional education service unit and state department of education in each state. One person from "outside" was assigned as a mentor to each school, where they hosted meetings to allow school people to share information and experiences with one another, and helped provide staff development. The Rural Clearinghouse also provided access to experts and resources beyond the two states.

Potpourri of activities

The clearinghouse invited staff at each school to design a project that would respond to their individual needs in multicultural education. Over the course of an academic year plus summers, the EMPIRE network provided a potpourri of activities designed to support each school's vision and plan for multicultural reform. Those activities ranged from workshops to release time for planning to access to electronic networks to opportunities to share resources with other members of the cluster.

Some of the projects initiated by the schools included:

- A high school in south central Washington introduced a bilingual chemistry course, making one of its upper-level science courses more accessible to college-bound Hispanic students.
- Schools on the Navajo and Hopi reservations sponsored school exchanges, creating opportunities to help Indian youth "understand others but hear and respect the inner voice of their own culture."
- A school in southern Washington developed a parent handbook in Spanish, sparking a districtwide discussion about how to communicate better with Hispanic families.
- Staff at a predominantly Anglo school in Arizona identified resources that could enrich students' and families' exposure to other cultures.
- The Yakima Tribal school focused on reintegrating Yakima culture into the life of the school.

A member of the Hilton Elementary School EMPIRE team in Zillah, Washington, works with students in her classroom.

Local emphasis paid off

Research into the effort has shown that the most far-reaching change came in schools that tailored projects to their own community. In addition, one project was built on top of another, which enabled participants to take advantage of local resources and to integrate efforts into the school.

Research has shown that the most far-reaching change came in schools that tailored projects to their own community.

One of the more noticeable outcomes of these projects has been the "ripple effect." Once bilingual instruction was introduced into the chemistry class, teachers in other fields began revising their expectations of Hispanic students. A Spanish literature course was introduced, allowing students to read the works in Spanish but discuss their reactions in English. Once staff in an elementary school began valuing cultural differences, children began forming new friendships. Racial conflict is rarely seen these days. Tensions between the Hopi and Navajo have diminished, at least among those who participated in the school exchange.

Policy issues

Work completed thus far suggests several issues for policymakers to consider. They include:

- *Partnerships with higher education need to leave schools in control of what and how they change.* Projects need to be designed by those most knowledgeable about the local school and community, although they can benefit from the knowledge and expertise of outside experts.
- *Accountability measures need to incorporate what motivates change.* Teachers often draw strength from the intangibles — their own growth and development, increased sense of teamwork among school staff and increased self-esteem of students.
- *Assessment efforts need to respect teachers' sources of strength* — They are fundamental to helping schools reform.
- *Staff development programs need to respond to efforts to improve schools.* When school personnel identify the problem they want to solve, they benefit more from staff development activities.
- *Efforts at multicultural reform need to value diversity.* If the process by which schools are asked to initiate multicultural reform does not itself respect differences, how can schools be expected to respect the cultural differences they find in their communities? Schools need to be free to pursue individually designed projects.

The process the clearinghouse is developing for rural schools may also be transferrable to urban schools. The key is to begin listening carefully to teachers, asking them to describe projects they can implement and outcomes that supply the energy for continued change. As a staff member at one school in Washington pointed out:

"... we started out thinking about what we needed to do for them -- the growing Hispanic population. Then we realized that we needed to change. We needed to value the cultural differences our students brought to school. ..."

Spears is co-director of the Rural Clearinghouse for Lifelong Education and Development located at Kansas State University. ★

Students at the Nazlini Boarding School in Ganado, Arizona, work on their cultural journals.

Rural schools lead reform effort in Alabama

by Jack Shelton

In Alabama, rural schools and the state's major university are working together to maintain and strengthen the schools and improve rural life. "Better Schools Building Better Communities" is a collaborative program of education reform and community development that is attracting attention and support both in this country and abroad. Participants include the PACERS Cooperative (an association of 29 small, rural public schools) and the Program for Rural Services and Research (PRSR) at the University of Alabama.

The cooperative, and eventually the "Better Schools" program, developed as PRSR sought to fulfill its mandate to make university resources available to rural Alabama communities through "mutually beneficial partnerships," which honor local initiative and strengths. Schools clearly were among the most likely partners because of their central r le in the community.

To determine their potential as partners, PRSR initiated a series of projects that resulted in tangible, public outcomes with the work completed by students. The work involved PRSR staff in the life of small rural schools throughout the state and gave them the chance to listen to students and teachers and to understand how the schools functioned. They discovered that the schools, which face severe funding limitations but often serve as surrogate families, were unusually successful in the academic and personal development of their students, especially those "at risk."

The staff also found strong school and community ties and a potential for more community involvement. However, the schools faced severe obstacles, the largest of which was closure.

Closure policies

The Alabama State Department of Education and Alabama's county-wide boards of education often pursue policies of school closure, believing that bigger is better and cheaper. There is little evidence to support either assumption, nor is there serious reflection on two crucial areas: (1) What are the alternatives to school closure in overcoming the effects of distance and population sparsity characteristic of rural places? (2) What are the strengths of small rural public schools and how can they be used to everyone's benefit?

To help rural schools use their strengths and deal with issues of distance and low population, PRSR, in collaboration with a nonprofit rural education support organization called ACCESS, initiated several new programs. The most important of these was the Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools (PACERS), set up to help rural teachers continue their education in several areas, including foreign language, for which most rural schools did not receive funding.

Teachers from small schools responded vigorously to this opportunity to obtain additional certification in foreign language. Their numbers and success attracted attention inside and beyond the institution and eventually resulted in the Foreign Language Institute, through which almost 100 schools obtained certified French or Spanish teachers.

The program demonstrated a cost-effective alternative to consolidation for curriculum expansion and revealed the potential that alliances between higher education and public schools have for building local capacity.

Perhaps the most important result was that teachers from small rural schools had a unique opportunity to work together. Their requests for a formal format for collaboration matched PRSR's own concern for long-term small school cooperation to address common issues and to build upon common strengths.

"Better Schools"

With support from the Lyndhurst Foundation, PRSR began to organize a cooperative of schools that would be geographically, economically and racially representative of Alabama. Additional support from the Ford Foundation funded a series of planning meetings in which teachers and community residents considered the strengths, needs and resources of their schools and communities.

"Better Schools Building Better Communities" emerged from the process as an organic program that values the local community and provides students opportunities to study and serve it. High academic expectations are placed upon students as they do real work that affects their communities. At the same time, the community based nature of the activities garners local endorsement and provides motivation and validation for students and teachers who are encouraged by the opportunity to do meaningful work for their communities.

Rural students may have opportunities to participate in educational activities that also serve the needs of their communities, such as compiling local history. (Photo by Ruth Harris)

Three components

"Better Schools" has three components. "Genius of Place" helps overcome the abstract, general nature of schooling by focusing on the local community and rooting study of the larger world in the lives and experiences of students. Students are preparing and conducting community surveys, studying local geography, opening museums, carrying out school and home energy audits and producing community yearbooks. They are creating and staffing community newspapers and writing local histories. Communities, in turn, receive information crucial for development.

The second component, "Sustaining Communities," focuses on the basic needs of individuals and communities: food, shelter, health and good work. Through hands-on efforts that serve their communities, students study and use science, mathematics, physics, statistics, economics and other subjects. For example, students are building low-cost, low-maintenance solar-heated houses and retrofitting houses with solar appliances to reduce upkeep and utilities cost. They are documenting local health status with inventories they have prepared, studying local water quality and testing for lead poisoning, a serious problem for many Alabama children. Students also started a computer assembly business that provides the PACERS Cooperative with high-quality, low-cost computers, which have been essential to the development of the cooperative's statewide information and resource-sharing network.

Finally, "Joy" helps instill in young people skills and dispositions for enjoying life and living together. Students are writing and producing plays, helping their schools develop parks and using photography to document and celebrate their communities.

Good support

Both the cooperative and its "Better Schools" program have attracted public and private support because of their potential to reform schooling and revitalize rural communities. Other partners include many of Alabama's telephone companies, the Farmers Home Administration, the Alabama Public Library Service, three of the federal education labs, the Freshwater Institute of the Conservation Fund and a variety of other local and state agencies.

The PACERS Cooperative, PRSR and their many partners have taken significant steps on the road to school reform and rural community development by developing processes, programs and partnerships through which schools can create and "own" reform and serve their communities. Their work offers much to ongoing national efforts to improve schools and communities.

Shelton directs the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama. ★

A portrait of rural schools

Editor's note: The following information is excerpted from The Condition of Education in Rural Schools, *in production by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. It provides an unprecedented collection of information about rural schools that will be useful to policy makers and others concerned about rural education issues. For information on ordering this publication, available at the end of December, contact Joyce Stern, U.S. Department of Education, OERI, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208-5644.*

Challenges to understanding rural education

Rural education research. Small scale, isolation and sparsity of population are still not considered important by many researchers and are thus ignored.

Limited awareness of cultural diversity: Stereotypical images of rural life inhibit understanding the wide diversity that exists across regions and even within states.

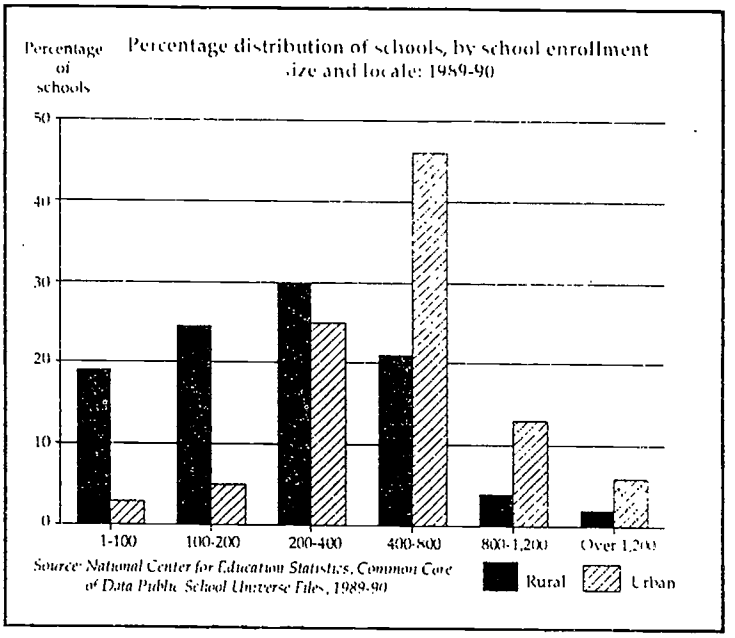
Multiple definitions of rural: Definitions of rural in both federal and state statutes vary widely.

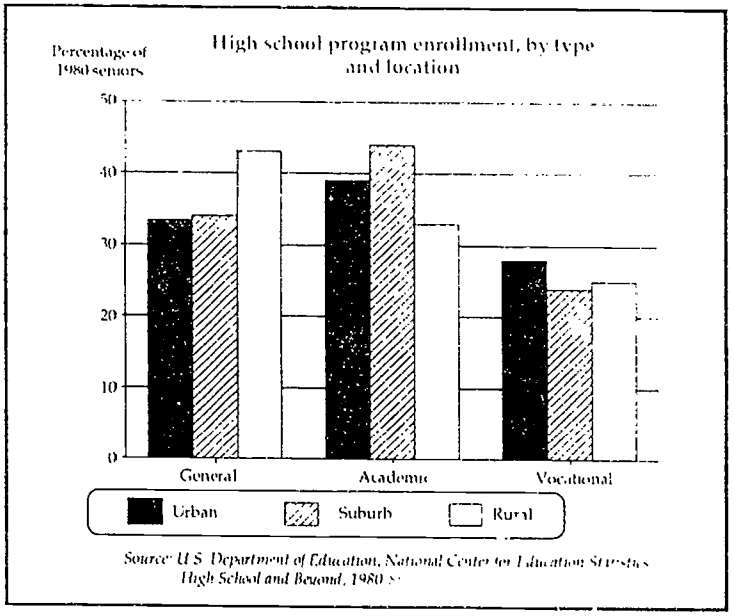
Context of rural education

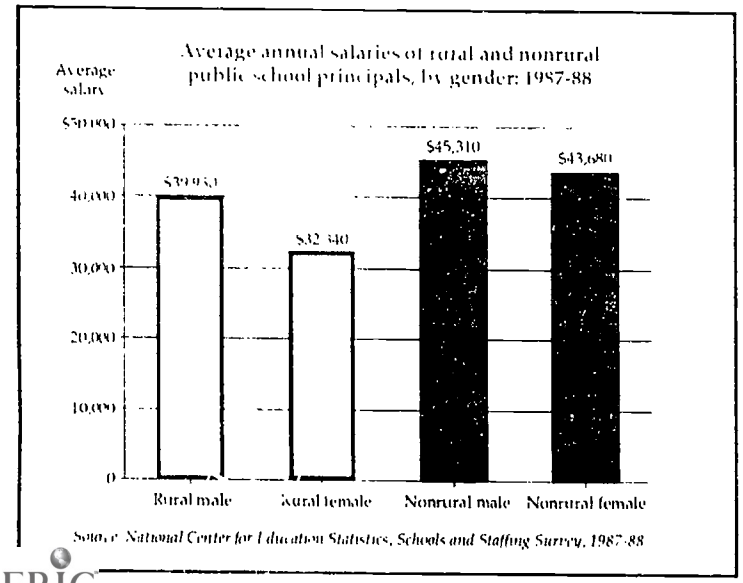
- Rural America is sparsely populated, averaging fewer than 40 residents per square mile.
- In 1988, the nonmetropolitan job loss rate was 40% higher than in metro counties.
- Rural jobs tend to require few skills and pay poorly, compared to nonrural jobs.
- Rural poverty rates equal or exceed those in central cities. More than 18% of rural residents (and one in four rural children) were living in poverty by 1985, with poverty increasing twice as fast in rural areas as in urban areas from 1979 to 1986.

Characteristics

- In 1989-90, more than 6.6 million students attended some 22,400 rural schools, accounting for 16.6% of regular public school students and 28.3% of regular public schools.
- Rural schools and rural school districts usually enroll small numbers of students, i.e., fewer than 1,000 per district.
- Rural school districts are experiencing significant enrollment declines.
- Per-pupil transportation costs are inordinately high in rural schools because of the smaller number of students.
- Rural school districts depend almost exclusively on real property taxation for their local revenue.
- Rural schools have smaller student/teacher ratios than other schools, with small rural secondary schools having the lowest at 1:12.5.
- National data show that rural students' standardized assessment scores have risen in recent years and now approximate the national average. Scores tend to be significantly higher than scores of urban students but lower than those of suburban students.







Education and work experiences of rural youth

- Rural students see themselves more often in lower-level, less-skilled positions than nonrural youth. Only about 16% of rural youth, for example, plan to attain an advanced degree, compared to about 23% for suburban and slightly less for urban youth.
- Black and Hispanic students in rural areas are far more likely to drop out than were metropolitan members of minority groups.
- Minority groups in rural areas also have higher rates of functional illiteracy than rural whites and minorities in nonrural areas.
- The average rural resident has a high school diploma, compared to a 9th-grade education 30 years ago.

For more information from *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools*, see page 12. ★

ECS helping states bring rural schools into reform effort

by Chris Pipho

> "The education reform movement of the last decade has had little impact on rural schools."
>
> — Statement made at *Connecting Rural Communities*, a session at the ECS National Forum last summer in Pittsburgh

For participants attending the rural communities session, this comment generated little surprise and no little acknowledgement, but one has to wonder if the legislators and governors who have drafted the education reforms of the last decade would react with the same believing nods.

Many forces influence policy making for rural schools, yet rural issues are rarely seen in totality. The strengths that exist in rural communities are often overlooked; to most policy makers, *rural* means *small*. And, because rural issues differ from community to community and from one region of the country to the next, rural differences often go unnoticed. Rural issues don't receive good media coverage, and because of population sparsity, community activism is less organized. Yet student achievement is often high and public support for schools unwavering. What often is missing in urban schools — strong families, two-parent homes, small class sizes — are abundant in rural schools.

One size doesn't fit all

But the "one-size-fits-all" state approach to education policy making and reform frequently does not take into account these differing needs and strengths. Rural educators cite examples such as these:

- **The top-down mandates that began in 1983 to raise student achievement and improve the quality of the teaching force have had both uneven and unintended outcomes on rural schools.** Some rural communities view mandated higher graduation requirements with more mathematics and science courses as a move to force small districts to consolidate. In some states, school districts have had to turn to distance learning technology to meet new curricular requirements, leading states to make decisions about the comparability of instruction offered by a "long-distance" teacher outside the district and state versus a teacher in a local classroom. Statewide technology plans had to be developed on short notice.

  Such reforms often had a different impact on rural schools than on their counterparts in urban areas. *Did state policy makers understand or anticipate these unintended outcomes? Did rural communities have an opportunity to express their concerns or opinions for implementation? Is a reform plan that emphasizes college entrance requirements contributing to the "out-migration" of students, and in turn creating, rather than solving, a rural problem?*

- **Both the cost of educating students and the amount of local property wealth differs widely between rural and urban areas.** Occasionally, funding formulas take into account the necessarily-small school district's rural transportation needs and isolation or sparsity factors, but probably not often enough. Declining student counts in some rural states have presented unique funding formula difficulties. In Iowa, the legislature created the "phantom-student" count, giving districts an opportunity to spread student decline over more than one year — only to discover that Des Moines, the largest district in the state, was collecting more of the money than rural areas.

  Again, the results, although unintended, did not favor rural areas. To its credit, Iowa has several incentive programs to encourage rural areas to share administrators and students. These programs recognize that incentives can lead to more changes than mandates.

ECS is working with states to help them fit rural communities' vision of education into the state's vision for reform

Rural revitalization

The out-migration of young people, the general economic decline of some rural areas and the overall fear that school closures or consolidation will trigger a death knell for a community concern rural educators in regard to education reform. It is possible that a statewide education reform plan cannot fix some of these problems. States must, however, find a better way to reinforce each rural community's vision of education and fit this into a systemic statewide vision for education. Collaboration with all elements of the community is key, and the school may be the natural gathering point for a community to develop a new vision for rural education.

Last year, ECS started to work with a group of states to develop the tools that a state or community could use to determine where its education system is, how it has changed and whether it is progressing toward a common goal. Entitled *The State Education System — A Continuum of Systemic Change*, this discussion/leadership guide gives groups an opportunity to discuss five areas of the education system (vision, policy making and alignment, teaching and learning, public and political support and networks, partnerships and collaboration). The continuum includes how the present system looks and works through stages of awareness, transition and eventually the development of a plan for a new system of education.

ECS also is working with the National Rural Education Association and foundations to adapt this leadership discussion tool to rural needs. Developing and piloting a "needs assessment" that involves K-12 education, higher education, health services and rural economic development efforts may be vital for developing a new role for rural education and the survival of rural communities. The ECS continuum tool could help clarify where communities are, where they want to go and how they should get there. Most of all, if adapted for rural communities and their special needs, it could reinforce the positive reforms many rural systems already have made and help state policy makers better understand rural issues as a whole.

Pipho is ECS director of state relations and the Clearinghouse ★

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