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Rural Equity Series

Equity and Expectations: Leading Rural Communities through Unprecedented Pressures

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Rural schools are often considered to be the heart of the community, serving as social centers and often, a major source of local employment (Schlafft, 2016). They provide spaces for local organizations, community fundraising events, community gardens or farms, family education centers, and other sources of civic engagement. Community members gather at rural schools for sporting events and student performances.

Beyond their walls, rural schools are also integrated into the life of the community, partnering in formal and informal ways with parents, grandparents, churches, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses to promote community development while strengthening rural families and youth. These collaborations aid in promoting student success by focusing on the wellness of the whole child, family, and community as entities inextricably connected to student success.

Rural educational leaders are central to their communities. They may attend local church services, shop at community businesses, or serve as members of local organizations (Lamkin, 2006). Not all rural school leaders live close to school, but almost all are highly visible in the surrounding communities. Some scholars describe this phenomenon as operating in a fishbowl of attention (Burdge, 2006). One rural school principal shared how the high visibility affected him and his family. He said, "Anytime I'm in public, my wife, she'll say, 'You're too serious when we go out,' and I'll say, 'Baby, I have to be. Somebody's watching us.' She thinks I'm paranoid, but every place we go somebody says, 'Hey Mr. [Knight]!' So…when I'm out in public, I'm always a little guarded. When I go home I can be more myself than I can anywhere else. Home is inside my house. When I hit that driveway, I can breathe a little bit."

This additional scrutiny of rural educational leaders creates simultaneous advantages and disadvantages for equity work. Rural leaders' integration into community life can aid them in creating and sustaining collaborative relationships with community organizations to support equity practices. For example, some rural school leaders partner with local religious organizations for a range of volunteer activities, including "backpack programs"—feeding programs designed to ensure students have access to three meals each day when they are not in school. Rural school leaders can also facilitate essential connections between community members. One Vermont principal leveraged his role as a community leader; his regular informal conversations with local families provided him with significant understanding of the dynamics of the community. He used this information to connect unemployed residents with local businesses who were hiring, and families in need of emergency housing with local landlords.

The visibility and centrality of rural leaders creates challenges for equity work, however. Rural administrators, like most educational leaders, are beholden to local, elected boards of education, who, theoretically, represent the most powerful interests of the local community. Rural school leaders are also influenced by those without formal positions, who have power due to their positions, such as local business owners, or members of prominent local families. Both official and unofficial community leaders can wield significant power in schools, influencing curriculum, resource allocation, and administrator tenure, and are unlikely to give up some of that power in the name of increased equity (Hall, 2016). Further, rural leaders themselves can be resistant to change. Unless they are specifically hired as reformers, rural leaders have historically been selected to lead rural schools and districts because they represent dominant community interests (Mayo, 1999; Nestor-Baker, 2002).

In northern Pennsylvania, for example, a large influx of Spanish-speaking students with special education needs entered a rural school system in the wake of the economic boom associated with fracking. At the same time, local low-income residents were largely displaced from rental units and faced new job insecurities because of the influx of new workers. Leaders in the rural school system attended to the needs of local students, with staff members even buying some children new shoes. These same leaders, however, met the needs of incoming students within a framework of compliance. Instead of instituting system-wide responses to meet their needs as they did with local youth, school leaders responded to newcomers' needs within the minimum required state and federal mandates. As part of local community power structures, their attention was placed on meeting the needs of locals rather than community outsiders, who they blamed for new burdens placed on local families, and who were different, particularly in terms of language and race (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017).

While the above illustration highlights economic and racial equity challenges, scholarly attention to such issues in rural settings is relatively new. There is a plethora of urban-centered equity research, yet our study is the first to explore the ways rural leaders implement state equity policies in their schools. Our research, funded by the Spencer Foundation, explores this leadership imperative in the American southeast, Appalachia, and the northeast with a focus on economic and racial equity issues. Some of the early

findings from our study suggest it can be profoundly difficult for educational leaders to discuss inequities that are present in the broader community (Sutherland & Williams, 2019). In South Carolina, racial inequity has a long, brutal legacy that continues to affect schools today. "Race here is the third rail," said one rural principal, continuing, "You grab that one, that's a problem. You have to be really careful with it… You feel ashamed about what's happened in the past, so you want to do better than your forebearers, but you don't really know what to do…You don't know what to say. And in this day and age, the idea is that people are so …one word can just really do you in, you know? You just don't talk about it."

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights and exacerbates preexisting rural inequities. For example, many rural parents lack the flexibility to stay home with their children during the school day, generating pressure to school systems to open their buildings in the midst of the pandemic. For rural school system leaders, the choice is between being responsible for potential loss of life or for the loss of jobs for local families. Beyond access to academic opportunities, COVID-19 has highlighted the pervasive epidemic of food insecurity for rural youth. Rural school systems scrambled to find ways to get food to children in need, including the delivery of meals through school bus routes or offering families multiple days of food at school building pick-up sites.

But, as this pandemic rages on, there are pockets of hope in rural communities. As inequities have been exposed, rural leaders, community leaders, and state leaders are forced to respond. For example, when school buildings closed in spring 2020, many rural families lacked access to broadband or technological devices necessary to participate in live instruction. These students, often already behind their peers academically, fell even further behind. Yet it also provided a crucial opportunity to draw attention to the inequities of broadband access in rural areas (NREA, 2020). In Maryland, districts were awarded grant money this summer to provide internet hot spots in homes without broadband access. Some rural South Carolina districts also converted school buses into Wifi hotspots, which they parked in central areas in the community. Families parked nearby, giving students the opportunity to participate in online work from the safety of a vehicle.

We also have observed powerful examples of successful collaboration between rural leaders and communities to advance educational equity. For instance, in one predominantly Black, rural community, the new school principal recognized the school furniture was unchanged from when she had attended decades prior. Using her knowledge of the district's policies, the principal promptly acquired new furniture and other resources for free, all of which were already available to the non-rural schools in the district. She also leveraged community connections to support the school, such as contacting local church leaders for support when critical issues were before the District's Board of Trustees. One of her colleagues explained, "If I go out there right now and send a notice to all the churches that says, 'Next Monday, we're going to pack [the board meeting],' they'll load up that church van. They'll load up the guys and they'll be there." These early findings suggest rural leaders can facilitate connections to build local support for equitable work in their schools.

Problems like persistent poverty and racism in rural communities are too great for schools to tackle alone. They require the formal partnership of community organizations and informal assistance of individuals and families to mitigate decades or centuries of inequities. And, they require resources in order to build and sustain successful partnerships. Long-term flexible investment from multiple entities, including states, are necessary to rural schools and communities to meet their specific needs. With attention turned to rural communities at this moment in time, we can be hopeful about the future.

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