In schools accustomed to making a little go a long way, the pandemic increased the burden.

Challenges Facing Schools in Rural America

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Last May, Mara attended graduation at a high school in a small, mostly African-American town in the rural Arkansas Delta. Cotton and soybean fields surround the school, and large granaries stand across the street. The town has a couple of barbeque places, a Family Dollar, and lots of abandoned store fronts, some without roofs and filled with waist-high wildflowers.

The school's campus includes elementary, middle, and high school buildings, but with district enrollment down to about 350, the old high school sits empty. The district's property tax rate is one of the highest in the state, but, with the area's low property values, tax revenue is minimal, and so the district's budget is tight. Staff salaries are among Arkansas's lowest: Teachers tend to start in districts

like this, get a few years experience, and then move on to wealthier places.

But on a Thursday night in May, no one is worrying about the budget—instead, teachers and students rush around tying ties and straightening robes. As the band begins a slightly off-key rendition of "Pomp and Circumstance," 22 seniors file into a gymnasium stuffed with 500 family, school staff, and community members clutching balloons and fanning themselves with programs. The soon-to-be graduates take their seats at the center of the gym floor, their caps glittery and bright under the lights. The valedictorian encourages her classmates to believe in themselves, and a teacher reads a list of the academic and athletic scholarships the students have won—this school's senior class routinely pulls in millions of dollars toward their further education. As the graduates receive diplomas and parade out, the bleachers erupt in a storm of cheering and stomping, marking the end of one journey and the beginning of the next.

This school is not much to look at. But for this rural town, it is everything: close relationships, strong academics, the community's hope and future. Across the United States are thousands of rural schools just like this one, which against all odds are trying to make it work—a challenge that has only grown with the current pandemic.

What Is "Rural"?

There is no single, agreed-upon definition of "rural."[1] The federal government uses more than 15 definitions, and states have their own. These classifications are typically tied to land use, population size or density, or proximity to an urban area. Most rely on a core distinction between "urban" and "rural" or "metropolitan" and "nonmetropolitan," with "rural" or "nonmetropolitan" being the leftover category. The U.S. census, for example, classifies places outside of those with 2,500 or more residents as "rural." While most definitions put the rural or nonmetropolitan population at around 20 percent of the country's residents, depending on the definition used, the U.S. population swings from 17 to 49 percent rural.

Rural America also means something in the popular imagination. Two fictions dominate the media: One is the nostalgic, romantic image of rural America (think *The Andy Griffith Show*); the other, very different fiction is the backwoods-and-backwards myth depicted in the movie *Deliverance* and in the more recent reality TV or news stories of opioid crises and rural decline. Through both of these false portrayals runs another myth: that rural America is a white America.[2] These myths obscure a true understanding of the strengths and challenges of rural communities, and they erase a significant part of the rural population.

Portrayals of rural communities as white, located in a cornfield or a coal field, economically declining, and losing population do not accurately depict most rural places. Rural America is much more diverse than it is usually made out to be.

Rural America stretches from the coast of Maine to the edges of Alaska, from the Mexican border to the boundary with Canada. It is flat and mountainous, arid and humid, just outside a city and a day's drive from a Walmart. Its communities are also diverse. Currently, people of color make up about 20 percent of the nation's rural population. Of these 10.3 million residents, about 40 percent are African American, 35 percent are Hispanic, and the remaining 25 percent are Native American, Asian, or Asian Pacific Islander or multiracial.[3] And rural places are growing even more diverse. From 2000 to 2010, the rural nonwhite population grew from 8.6 million to 10.3 million people, or by 19.8 percent, while the rural white population remained nearly flat. Much of this growth was due to a rapidly expanding rural Hispanic population, which grew during this period by 44 percent.

Rural economies are also diverse. Many rural industries are growing: Rural tourism has been booming; rural locales have become a destination for retirees and, when the pandemic first hit U.S. cities, even for some city dwellers; and organic farming and clean energy are thriving. However, other rural industries are struggling. Many of the industries that have traditionally defined rural places—agriculture, mining, timber, fishing—are declining.[4] Currently, only about 1 in 10 rural workers is employed in one of these sectors,[5] and those jobs continue to disappear. Globalization and economic restructuring have had disproportionate impacts in rural places, squeezing many rural industries

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and forcing out many small rural businesses. And on the eve of a new recession, rural America had not recovered from the last one: Rural jobs were still lagging behind pre-2007 recession levels.[6]

This economic decline takes an enormous toll on rural communities, especially those without much economic diversification—a feature of many rural economies. In 2017, 16.4 percent of nonmetropolitan residents were living in poverty, compared with 12.9 percent of metropolitan residents.[7] Persistent poverty—poverty that extends across generations—is particularly extreme in rural places: More than 85 percent of counties with poverty rates over 20 percent for at least 30 years are nonmetropolitan.[8] Rural poverty is also linked to substandard housing or homelessness, environmental destruction and toxicity, poor nutrition and food scarcity, and inadequate health care.

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Perhaps the largest challenge facing rural America right now is economic inequality. Inequality divides most rural places: Some rural families and children face greater barriers, more challenges, and fewer resources than others. Historically, many rural economies were rigidly stratified: Factory owners and mill workers, coal executives and coal miners, planters and sharecroppers.[9] Increasing automation, dwindling natural resources, and economic uncertainty have changed these industries, but they have not erased this underlying hierarchy. Today, it is CEOs of corporate farms and migrant farm workers or casino owners and hotel housekeepers. Low wages, high unemployment, and residential segregation further entrench inequality.[10] Segregated poverty also lowers property wealth, which erodes educational funds and can compromise the quality of education a child receives. The effects of rural poverty, therefore, are devastating and enduring.

But poverty is not equally distributed across the rural population. In 2017, the rural black poverty rate was 32 percent, the poverty rate for rural Native residents was 31 percent, and the rural Latinx poverty rate was 24.5 percent—while only 13.5 percent of rural white residents lived below the poverty line.[11] Rural communities of color are often concentrated in persistently poor places,[12] and poor rural communities of color experience even greater segregation than poor rural white communities.[13] "Rural America," then, is actually "rural Americas," a loose aggregate of racially separate and unequal places.

The challenges facing rural communities are large. But many also enjoy important strengths and resources. There are areas of significant rural economic growth, and many rural communities have expanding populations as well. Immigrants are bringing new ideas, resources, and human capital to rural places. Rural places also often rank high in social capital, which are the resources that come from relationships. It is difficult to measure or quantify this kind of relational resource, but we see it in the community that raises scholarship money so a local student can go to college or the town that turns out to rebuild a house lost to fire. These resources will keep rural America growing and thriving.

Characteristics of Rural Schools

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one-third of public schools are rural, and about one-fifth of public school students—9.3 million children—are educated in these rural schools. By some indicators, these schools and their students are performing quite well: Rural high schools have higher graduation rates than urban high schools, and rural students' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, have been higher, too.[14] Low-income students have been shown to fare better academically in rural than urban schools.[15]

Schools matter not only to students but also to surrounding communities, and in rural communities they are particularly influential, as they are often one of just a few institutions.[16] Rural schools may be a community's largest employer, and they support other businesses in town: Their buses are serviced at the local garage, and their bills are paid at the local bank. Rural schools can knit the social fabric of rural communities. As children sit for lunch in the cafeteria together or as parents staff the Friday night concession stand, they sustain old relationships and start new ones. Traditions and values are communicated in rural schools, through things like dress codes and annual celebrations, and sometimes they are challenged and changed, perhaps with protests to change a school mascot. Rural schools also offer

a community a measure of political power: Elected school boards determine the direction and future of their schools and therefore the direction and future of their communities. And rural schools can be an important force for racial integration and equity. They often pull together a number of small towns, which can offer the opportunity for a new, more diverse community in segregated contexts.

Disparities

Despite these successes, by many other indicators rural schools are struggling. There is a persistent test score gap between rural white students and rural Latinx and African American students, and there are also racial gaps in graduation rates.[17] Rural students do not go to college at the same rates as their urban and suburban counterparts, and they are particularly underrepresented in four-year degree programs and at selective schools.[18] Though more and more nonmetropolitan adults have college degrees, the rural/urban bachelor's degree gap is actually growing; 19 percent of nonmetro adults have bachelor's degrees compared with 33 percent of adults in metropolitan areas.[19] In many contexts, rural schools mirror the surrounding area's racial and class segregation. In these places, schools can divide communities and limit opportunities.

These kinds of disparities in outcomes tend to reflect disparities in resources, and, for many rural schools—especially those serving rural communities with high rates of poverty and rural communities of color—resources are scarce.

Funding is perhaps the biggest inequity of public education. Many rural districts are underfunded, some severely so.[20] While property-wealthy places can generate plenty of resources locally, places without high property values—like many rural areas—cannot, and they must rely on state and federal sources. But these sources are often tight, too. Only 17 percent of state education funding goes to rural districts, federal Title I formulas can disadvantage low-population rural places, and narrowly directed competitive grants are often not much help. For example, new computers mean little to a school with a leaky roof, a failing electrical system, and limited access to high-speed internet.[21]

These funding inequities mean fewer educational opportunities for rural students. Many rural students, for example, have limited access to advanced coursework. The average rural school offers half as many advanced math classes as the average urban school, and while more than 90 percent of suburban and urban schools offer at least one Advanced Placement course, only 73 percent of rural schools do.[22] Rural teachers' salaries are lower, too, which can raise teacher turnover—and also might explain rural teacher shortages in key areas, like STEM subjects and English learner instruction.[23]

And just as funding is running low, the demands on rural schools are increasing. Nearly one in four rural children lives in poverty,[24] and 13 percent of rural children under the age of six experience deep poverty, which means a family income below half the poverty line.[25] About 14 percent of rural students attend a school where more than three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This kind of deep, concentrated poverty is often associated with a greater need for additional resources, like social services or medical services—opportunities that cash-strapped rural districts can find hard to support.

The racial and ethnic demographics of schools are changing, too. Currently about 1 in 4 rural students is nonwhite, and, like in rural communities, this population is growing. More rural schools need to offer instruction to students learning English, and many are scrambling to recruit and retain a more diverse teaching force and provide additional professional development—all of which bring their own financial pressures. These pressures, coupled with declining enrollments in some rural districts, can lead to school closure. The country has dropped from over 270,000 schools in 1919 to less than 100,000 in 2010, and the vast majority of those closed have been rural schools.[26] These closures can mean long bus rides, less extracurricular participation, and decreased parent engagement—and they can devastate the surrounding community.

Policy Disconnects

Perhaps it is unsurprising then that many rural administrators and teachers argue that state and federal policies do not fit the rural context. Take the recent charter school and choice movement. Choice reforms only work if you have choices, but the long distances and small populations

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of rural places often cannot support multiple schooling options. So only 11 percent of charters are located in rural areas compared with 56 percent in urban, and these rural charter schools do not fare as well as their urban counterparts.[27] Virtual charter schools also are not much of an alternative: They have weak outcomes,[28] and as the pandemic has highlighted, many rural areas do not have the internet access needed. Similarly, No Child Left Behind Act and other accountability era policies included many provisions that proved unworkable for rural places, like turnaround models that require replacing an entire staff; in many rural places, there just are not enough people to replace them with.[29] While its successor, the Every Student Succeeds Act, offers states more flexibility, many rural schools are still subject to policies written for a state's urban and suburban contexts.

Other kinds of state mandates can also prove problematic for rural districts.[30] For example, many find it difficult to meet staffing requirements, due to small hiring pools or the need for teachers to cover multiple subject areas or grade levels. New construction mandates, like minimum building sizes, can bankrupt districts or force school closures. And curricular requirements can be difficult to staff and sometimes make little sense for schools with small student bodies. These mandates are especially challenging when they are unfunded or when state support expires after a few years.

Funding policy is an area of particular frustration for rural administrators, teachers, and families. While some states try to offset weak tax bases with additional state funds, 34 have flat or regressive formulas.[31] Competitive grant programs often offer little help for rural districts, as their limited staff may not have the time or expertise to write strong applications or the conditions of the grants might be so burdensome that they effectively exclude small schools. Therefore, many policy "solutions" are more problem than solution for rural schools.

Rural Schools and the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified many of the challenges facing rural schools. Rural schools are feeling the effects of the nation's digital divide acutely, which is limiting remote learning options for many rural students and compromising administrators' ability to communicate with parents. In many places, rural families are not able to access the medical, social, and mental health services that are often located at rural schools (see also article, p. 33). School counselors and organizations supporting rural college access are limited in the work they can do remotely—in-person college visits, for example, are suspended—and rural students may now be particularly reluctant to travel far from home for college.

As districts reopen, they are facing logistical challenges and costs—including, in many places, long bus routes and large numbers of retiring teachers—that further complicate recovery efforts.[32] The economic effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting and devastating, as districts—some of which have not yet recovered from the 2008 recession—are already cutting budgets to accommodate struggling communities. And these effects will likely be most profound for low-income rural communities of color, many of which are also facing the country's highest infection rates.

Conclusion

Rural America is experiencing an era of unprecedented demographic change, as rural communities of color are growing—an expansion that is necessary for keeping rural America thriving. But racial and class inequality divides many rural places, threatening rural students' education and rural communities' well-being, and the current pandemic is already exacerbating these divides. If these inequalities go unchecked, they will jeopardize rural communities across the country.

Education leaders play an important role in addressing these inequalities. First, policymakers must spend time in rural communities and schools, getting to know their unique obstacles and opportunities and, importantly, their most pressing equity issues. They should partner with rural leaders—school administrators but also community leaders like pastors and organizers—to design policies. These policies must account for the local context, such as a town's brutal racial history or the effects of a recently closed mill or long and mountainous bus routes. These details will dramatically shape a policy's effectiveness. A rural district, for example, may

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need more money for transportation, additional supports to combat histories of racial and economic injustice, or some flexibility around a program's particular requirements. Rural equity, not just equality, should be the goal. Finally, policymakers must change education funding formulas: Relying on property taxes to fund schools only perpetuates educational injustice.

As Mara sat in that Arkansas gymnasium and watched graduation last year, she was struck by all there was to celebrate at this little rural school: strong academic achievement, robust community engagement, and the hope, joy, and promise of graduation. That this school can accomplish these things with only the scarcest of resources and little state support is remarkable. But this should not be the case. Imagine what this rural school could do if it had the kind of support and recognition offered to other schools. State leaders must act: Rural schools need policies that promise all students, no matter where they live, a well-resourced, community-responsive education. ■

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Policymakers must change education funding formulas: Relying on property taxes to fund schools only perpetuates educational injustice.

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