Raising Rural Voices: Challenges & Opportunities in Rural Alabama Schools

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Abstract

> *Rural schools are unique in the challenges they face; therefore, it follows that the policies to address the challenges should also be unique and not adhere to the "one size fits all" mentality. This research uses a qualitative approach and takes the bold step to seek the input of teachers who work in rural schools for suggestions on how to solve challenges found in rural schools. Eight teachers from seven rural Alabama schools across seven different districts were convened in multiple focus groups organized around four themes—federal policy, state policy, local policy, and community partnerships. The findings from this study shed light on how "one size fits all" policies, which are often created by policymakers with an "urban" mindset, affect rural schools. Additionally, the study inspired a "rural school policy playbook" that includes recommendations for local, state, and federal policy changes to address the needs of rural schools. The solutions shared by the rural teachers we interviewed represent only the tip of the iceberg. Yet, they are important because they shed light on feasible solutions that could help address the contemporary challenges rural schools face.*

Keywords: *rural education policy, COVID-19, policy recommendations, consulting stakeholders*

Introduction

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant educational hardships, including school closures, staffing shortages, and heightened stress levels amongst teachers, parents, and students to schools across the nation (American Psychological Association, 2020; Delany-Barmann et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2022). Rural schools, their teachers, and their students were especially hard hit (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Delany-Barmann et al., 2021; Anderson, 2020). In part, the disproportionate pandemic-related hardships faced by rural schools were the result of exacerbated pre-existing challenges (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, rural schools experienced teacher shortages, limited broadband connectivity, transportation challenges, limited funding, and segregation along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Though teacher shortages are currently occurring in nearly all regions of the country, rural and low-income urban areas are often more severely affected than other areas due to lower salaries and poorer working conditions (Sutcher et al., 2019). Working conditions for rural teachers declined even more during the pandemic, as they were called back to in-person learning sooner than their urban counterparts (Schwartz et al., 2021). The swift return to in-person learning for many rural schools was likely necessitated, at least in part, by a

lack of broadband (or reliable, high-speed broadband) access in rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). To make matters worse, students in rural areas also had limited access to technological devices and often were sent home with paper instructional packets to complete in place of virtual learning (Wright, 2021). All of these factors, alongside limited funding, compounded to worsen existing inequities for rural schools, necessitating new, rural solutions.

Now, more than ever, it is important to understand the challenges rural schools face. At the same time, it is also critical that we look for viable solutions that could be used to alleviate them. In this study, we ask two questions that allow us to do both:

1. What are the major challenges that rural schools currently face, as described by rural teachers?
2. What policy solutions do rural teachers suggest as solutions to these challenges?

In order to better understand the contemporary challenges faced by rural schools and teachers, we conducted focus group meetings with rural teachers from the state of Alabama. Though our conversations included discussions of the pandemic's effects, the pandemic was not the sole focus. Instead, we saw the pandemic as a catalyst that cemented the need for a deeper understanding of the challenges our rural schools currently face.

During our conversations, we also asked teachers about their views on policy solutions that could be levied to improve conditions for rural schools, teachers, and students. Heeding rural-specific policy recommendations is important because policy solutions are often created for urban or suburban schools, and thus are not always relevant to the problems of rural schools (Arsen et al., 2021; Dulgrian, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Weiss, 2019).

In the pages that follow, we will present the data from our conversations with eight rural teachers, highlighting the major challenges related to local, state, and federal policies that they shared with us. While teachers are a seemingly obvious choice as a resource for understanding education policy, they are rarely consulted (Ferlazzo, 2015). We hope that our study will highlight the invaluable insight teachers have, not only about the challenges they face but also about potential policy solutions. Furthermore, we hope this research can be used to inform both policymakers and practitioners of the contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural K-12 education.

Contemporary Challenges for K-12 Education

Public K-12 schools face a myriad of challenges which contribute to overall school climate and culture and ultimately negatively impact student achievement. General problems that schools, and in particular rural schools, are facing include extremely impoverished student populations, teacher shortages, a lack of adequate funding, inequitable accountability measures, learning loss due to COVID-19, and lack of reliable broadband access (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Fontana et al., 2022; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Lavalley, 2018). Despite a large proportion, one-fifth, of the U. S. public school population attending rural schools (White House Rural Council 2011; NCES, 2016, Johnson et al., 2022) and about half of all school districts being located in rural areas (Johnson, et al., 2022), rural school voices are often overlooked when determining school policy (Johnson, et al., 2022). Lavalley (2018) suggests that there are two primary reasons for focusing on urban and suburban challenges. First, most students are educated in urban or suburban schools, thus it is hypothesized that policy makers choose to focus their efforts where they perceive the

largest impact can be made. Likewise, rural schools are not distributed equally across states resulting in many states not seeing the need to address rural education issues. This oversight of rural school needs often leads to a "one size fits all" approach which ignores the uniqueness of rural schools (Silverman, 2005).

Poverty and Funding

"Not only is child poverty experienced at higher rates in rural areas, it is also experienced as deep poverty more frequently than in urban areas" meaning a child's family income falls below half of the poverty line (Lavalley, 2018, p.4). Although it is easiest to assume poverty affects all school children in the same manner, researchers assert that this is a false assumption. The experience of growing up in poverty manifests differently depending on geographic location. Urban students experience environmental stresses such as increased air and noise pollution and substandard housing options while rural students experience geographic isolation marked by limited access to community resources such as hospitals, libraries, museums, and public transportation (Pendola, et al., 2022). The region known as the Alabama Black Belt, named for the rich black soil, has been compared to a third world country and is characterized by extreme poverty, food deserts, and a lack of running water, electricity and functioning sewage systems (Ballesteros, 2017). When students do not have their basic needs met, they struggle to succeed academically. Data from Alabama school districts with high levels of generational poverty demonstrate an association with low student achievement, while more affluent school districts are associated with above average student achievement (Pendola, et al., 2022). Poverty can have significant negative effects on students as children growing up in poverty often lack access to books in the home, do not receive regular healthcare or have access to nutritional foods. This triad places children at risk of delayed language development, health related issues, a lack of social and cognitive development, and increased behavioral issues collectively resulting in lower student achievement (Pendola, et al., 2022; Krashen, 2011; Sanchez, 2021).

Rural school districts typically receive lower funding due to smaller school enrollments and funding structures which rely on the local tax base to supplement school budgets (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). With low enrollments in small rural districts, the per pupil funding formula does not adequately cover fixed expenses such as administrator and teacher salaries and building maintenance. Additionally, due to the isolated nature of rural schools, transportation costs are often exorbitant (Silverman, 2005). Meeting the fixed budgetary demands leaves little room in the budget for building repairs, course materials, laboratory supplies, and enrichment experiences, thereby directly impacting student achievement.

Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages have impacted schools nationwide, but rural schools have suffered the shortages more than most. Teacher shortages are problematic because a "lack of sufficient, qualified teachers and staff instability threatens students' ability to learn and reduce teachers' effectiveness, and high teacher turnover consumes economic resources that could be better deployed elsewhere" (Garcia & Weiss, 2019, p. 1). Solutions to the teacher shortage can be grouped into two distinct categories, recruiting and retention.

Recruiting teachers, especially rural school teachers, is negatively impacted by low salaries. Historically, salaries for teachers have been less than workers in professions with similar

education requirements making the teaching profession much less attractive (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Schools that are better equipped to provide higher salaries are more likely to attract better qualified and more experienced teachers, leaving schools with high concentrations of low income students, minority students, or schools located in rural areas with fewer qualified teachers to fill vacancies (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Many states have turned to "grow your own" and shortened pathways to teacher certification in an effort to increase the supply of teachers; however, the impact of these alternative certification routes is yet to be determined. It has been shown that alternatively certified teachers are more often employed in high poverty or high minority school districts and leave the profession at greater rates than their traditionally certified counterparts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Retaining experienced teachers in the profession is the second facet of the teacher shortage. Schools invest time and money into teacher professional development that cannot be recouped when teachers leave the field. Working conditions such as large class sizes, little planning time, lack of administrative support, and student discipline often leaves teachers turning away from the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). To successfully fight the teacher shortage, we must find a means of stemming the flow of teachers choosing to exit the profession.

Broadband Access

Because of their distance from centralized hubs and lower population density, rural areas lack reliable broadband, putting them at a significant disadvantage (Williams & Grooms, 2015; Ford, 2018). Despite assistance through locally and nationally established programs, broadband inequity has continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, a study conducted by researchers at the PEW Research center revealed that though rural residents "have seen a 9 percentage point rise in home broadband adoption since 2016", they continue to have reduced access to broadband in their homes as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Vogels, 2021, para. 2).

Inequitable access to broadband can put rural students at a significant disadvantage. Students who lack, or have reduced, access to, broadband services at home are less able to complete work requiring the internet outside of school hours. For example, these students may not be able to complete homework, or access synchronous lessons on "virtual learning" days (Graves et al., 2021). Fortuitously, increasing broadband availability and access has been a policy priority, especially after the pandemic. Government intervention to adopt expanded access to high-speed broadband results in increased economic growth and improved labor (OECD, 2011), better communications within and between countries (Sumari et al., 2006), increased employments and population growth, and more opportunities for those living in rural communities (Nirmalathas, 2016; Picot, 2007). Initiatives for closing the digital gap for students in need include Bring Your Own Device programs, the free WiFi movement (Fuentes-Bautista & Inagaki, 2006), partnering with local businesses, colleges, or churches to offer high-speed Internet to communities (Bolkan, 2016), and monetary government intervention (Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, 2017).

Accountability

In 2001, the federal government reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) through the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (which was replaced by ESSA in 2015). NCLB brought increased attention to student achievement, especially for students who have faced historic disadvantages. In an effort to ensure that all students were being well-served by their schools, the policy focused on accountability measures that could be used to help identify schools that were in need of improvement (Forte, 2010).

According to the Erwin et al. (2021) "school accountability systems can serve many purposes, including sharing information, measuring progress toward state and local goals, and supporting greater educational equity" (para. 1). Still, the reliance on high stakes testing that is associated with contemporary accountability systems is often criticized; suggesting that there is room for improvement in our current accountability strategies. This need for improvement is especially clear for rural schools for whom the cost of developing data-systems for accountability purposes is high (Carrier & Whaland, 2017), and the results of standardized tests are not always valued by parents (Woodrum, 2004).

COVID-19 Learning Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of "normal" daily life, and education was no exception. Schools were not exempt when the federal and state governments issued "shutdowns", and thus teachers and students were forced to adapt quickly to distance learning. Though school administrators and teachers worked quickly and tirelessly to respond to unprecedented changes, we have since seen that there is largely no substitute for in-person learning at the K-12 level. Challenges associated with distance learning include a lack of the tools (ex. broadband, laptop, tablet) needed to connect to virtual learning platforms, a lack of motivation to "log in" and complete virtual work, limited support from parents at home, and isolation to name a few (Dorn et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; Tirado, 2021). Because of this, we have seen evidence of "COVID-19 learning-loss" (Dorn et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020) and an increase in mental health issues in students (Margolius et al., 2020), both of which present new challenges for our schools.

Methods

Multiple Case Study Research Design

In this study, we used a multiple case study design in which we treat each of our eight participants as their own case. All participants were teachers in rural, Alabama schools. Case study research, which is useful for examining complex, real-life scenarios, is appropriate for the timely research questions asked in this study (Patten, 2018). Furthermore, the case study approach is particularly suited to help researchers explain "contemporary circumstances," in our case the contemporary challenges faced by rural schools (Yin, 2017).

After we conducted our focus group meetings, our data analysis strategy proceeded in three steps. First, we compiled and reviewed the transcripts of our conversations with each of the eight teachers. Next, we conducted a within-case thematic analysis for each individual participant, where we looked for and coded themes in their discussions. After coding the data from each individual

case, we used a thematic analysis to look for patterns across cases. In the sections to follow, we will provide additional details about our participants and the data collection process followed by our findings which highlight the most prominent patterns found by our data analysis process.

Data Collection

For this study, focus groups were used as the primary method of data collection. Prior to the full focus group sessions, the lead researcher met with each participant individually to introduce the research and build a rapport. These short introductory meetings served to ensure that all participants understood (1) the purpose of the project, (2) the ways in which data would be used, (3) that their privacy would be protected, and (4) what was expected of participants. The meetings also allowed the lead researcher to poll participants' availability for meetings, preferred meeting durations, and background characteristics.

Following the individual meetings with each participant, the lead researcher began planning for the four upcoming focus group meetings. Each focus group meeting took place on Zoom and was scheduled to last 1.5 hours. Dates for meetings were determined after polling participants' availability. The lead researcher served as the facilitator for all meetings. Approximately one week before each focus group session, the lead researcher distributed a list of broad topics/questions that would be covered in the upcoming meeting. Focus groups were organized around four themes – federal policy, state policy, local policy, and community partnerships – and the topics discussed in each meeting had a direct tie to the theme. While each focus group meeting asked questions about researcher-selected policy issues, there was always an opportunity for participants to discuss alternate policy issues that they saw as important or influential. In this way, sessions were guided by the facilitator, but allowed for participant led discussion as well.

Data from the focus group sessions were collected in two primary ways. First, with permission from participants, the Zoom sessions were recorded to allow for transcription. Secondly, the lead researcher and focus group facilitator took notes during the focus group sessions. Meeting transcripts were used to supplement the researcher's notes with participant quotes and to ensure that all notes accurately reflected the sessions. Both sources were utilized during the thematic analysis process.

Though all efforts were made to schedule meetings at times when all participants were available, participants did miss meetings at times. Last minute schedule conflicts, family emergencies, and illness were the top reasons for missed meetings. When this occurred, the lead researcher offered alternate individual meetings or the option to submit thoughts on paper.

Participants

In total, eight rural teachers from seven rural schools were recruited to participate in this research study as members of a "Rural Teacher Caucus". Caucus members were paid a small stipend for their time. The researchers used purposive sampling to select participants who were expected to be knowledgeable about the impacts of public policy on their schools. Participants were all recruited through their connections with the University of West Alabama as past students in either graduate or undergraduate programs. Diversity was prioritized in the selection of participants.

The research participants were from two racial groups—75% identified as White and 25%

identified as Black. The majority (62.5%) of participants identified as female, while 37.5% identified as male. Participants also had diverse educational specialties. Three participants were special education teachers, two were elementary school teachers, and three were secondary school teachers. Six of the eight participants taught at traditional public schools, and two taught at a public charter school. Participants' schools were located in seven rural school districts and six rural counties. See Table 1 for additional details about the participants.

Table 1: *Participant Overview*

Name	Gender	Race	Grade Level Taught	Subject Taught	County
Sharon	Female	White	Middle/High	English	Monroe
Wendy	Female	White	High	Special Education	Jackson
Marie	Female	White	Middle	English	Fayette
Bethany	Female	White	Elementary	Elementary Ed	Marengo
Simone	Female	Black	Elementary	Elementary Ed	Sumter
Greg	Male	White	Middle	Social Studies	Sumter
Malcolm	Male	White	Elementary	Special Education	Pickens
Allen	Male	Black	Middle	Special Education	Marengo

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

Location

Each of the teachers that participated in our study worked in rural Alabama schools at the time of study. While the majority of the teachers who participated in our study taught in the Black Belt region of Alabama, we had teachers from north and south Alabama as well. Alabama is an important state in which to study rural education issues because over 80% of the state's counties are considered rural, and nearly half of all Alabama residents live in rural areas (Alabama Department of Public Health, 2021). Furthermore, because Alabama has historically been one of the lowest performers in education (US World News Report, 2021), it is important that more researchers focus on educational issues in the state.

Compared to the rest of the United States, Alabama residents experience poverty at higher rates, have reduced access to broadband and computers, and are less educated (United States Census Bureau, 2022). In the Black Belt, these inequities are even more stark, as it is one of the poorest and most racially isolated regions in the country (Mann & Rogers, 2021; Wimberly et al., 2014). The participants in our study came from schools in some of the most high-need areas of the state of Alabama and country as a whole.

Findings

We began this study with a desire to learn about the contemporary challenges and opportunities for rural schools, as described by rural teachers. Specifically, we asked teachers to discuss how policies developed at the local, state, and federal levels affect their schools, and what improvements could be made to ensure that public policies better serve our rural schools. This exploration is important for two reasons. First, it allowed us to learn more about how policies, which are often created by policymakers with an "urban" mindset, affect rural schools (Arsen et al., 2021; Dulgrian, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Weiss, 2019). Secondly, it allowed us to discover new, teacher supported, solutions to contemporary challenges. In the sections to follow, we present findings that emerged from a thematic analysis of the data collected over a span of four focus group meetings with our caucus.

Local Policy Challenges and Opportunities

The first focus meeting we held asked our teachers to share their views about local policies that affected their schools. Specifically, we asked the teachers to share (1) which policies, at the district level, were particularly successful, (2) which policies, at the district level, needed the most improvement, and (3) what ideas they had for either improving existing policy or creating new policies. The eight caucus members worked in seven different school districts, allowing for substantial variation in local policy contexts.

At the local level, we found that the majority of challenges reported by our caucus fell under two key themes—technology/broadband access and pandemic-related learning loss. While expanded broadband access, as a policy issue, is often supported by federal and state governments, it is still tied to specific locales. Furthermore, the teachers who participated in our study revealed that at the district-level, access to the type, age, and amount of technology varied greatly. For example, two of the seven schools our caucus members represented lacked 1:1 technology for students, with one school "not even having enough technology for the teachers". Of the schools that had 1:1 technology, most allowed students to take their devices (typically Chromebooks) home; however, one school required devices to be kept in the classroom. While keeping devices on school property limits students' abilities to use them for homework, it may be an ideal strategy to prevent damaged devices, which one teacher noted was a challenge.

The combination of limited access to devices and reliable, speedy broadband connections created a large roadblock to virtual learning during the pandemic. Three of the eight teachers we met with reported that the choice to go virtual during the pandemic led to significant learning loss for their students. They reported that this was, at least in part, due to a lack of enforceable policies to ensure that students selecting virtual instruction actually logged on and completed their work. Allen reported that his school struggled significantly with students who "chose virtual but never logged on". Ultimately, this resulted in students being "up to 1.5 years behind" in their learning. While this amount of learning loss is troubling, the teachers we worked with recommended several viable strategies that could be used to mitigate learning loss. Largely, their recommendations were tied to successful school or district level interventions that they had observed. Three teachers shared in-school interventions that worked for their students, while three shared interventions that took place outside of normal school hours. Some schools used a combination of the two. Their in-school recommended interventions for COVID-19 learning loss included: 30 minute intervention blocks, full period intervention blocks, and even full intervention days during the regular school

week. In terms of interventions that take place outside of normal school hours, teachers suggested summer and weekend intervention programs. More intensive intervention programs were used by schools with higher levels of learning loss; suggesting that schools and districts consider the level of learning loss when designing intervention programs.

State Policy Challenges and Opportunities

In our second focus group meeting, we asked the participating teachers to share how current Alabama policies have affected their schools, and what recommendations they have for state policy reform. In reference to state level challenges, two themes were clearly identified – challenges related to the teacher shortage and those related to standardized testing. The theme of the teacher shortage was especially strong in our caucus' discussion of state level challenges, as it affected each of the schools represented by our participants, albeit in different ways.

Specifically, the teachers we met with expressed concern over the use of long-term subs, emergency certified teachers, uncertified teachers, and a lack of aides and substitutes. Each of these factors was said to be problematic for different reasons. For example, a lack of substitutes was said to contribute to burnout; whereas the overuse of emergency certified teachers was said to be discouraging to teachers who had "paid their dues" and "put in the time and money" to get certified. In those schools where getting certified teachers was a persistent problem, our participants lamented that this negatively affected their students. For example, Sharon shared that her school had only three certified teachers for grades 7-12, while Allen added that his school had not had a certified math or English teacher in at least two years.

While the teacher shortage has been well-researched (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019), we believe that our study offers valuable insights into ways that it can be alleviated. Teacher retention and recruitment in rural areas must be a priority, and we believe that current teachers are a perfect source to consult on teacher retention strategies. Rural schools are often underfunded, and thus rural teachers are often underpaid (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). One of the most obvious solutions to this problem, which can affect both recruitment and retention, would be to raise teacher salaries. Unfortunately, this solution has proven to be easier said than done. Understanding that, the teachers who participated in our study offered some more creative solutions that could be levied to improve rural teacher recruitment and retention rates.

One of the most popular suggestions was that the state offer improved benefits such as sick leave, mental health days, and maternity/paternity leave. Bethany shared that she was only able to take 20 days of maternity leave, of which only 11 were paid. Malcom suggested that "mental health days" be added to the typical time-off benefits, as a way to ensure that teachers can take time to re-set when they become overwhelmed and begin to experience symptoms of burn-out. Finally, multiple teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the removal of paid COVID-19 leave when the teachers continue to be exposed to the virus in their classrooms.

While the first two solutions offered by our participants would likely benefit rural and urban teachers alike, our participants also shared some creative, rural-specific solutions. First, Simone suggested that when hiring new teachers, administrators "look for people who want to stay rural". Building on that, Malcom recommended that administrators make a point to "sell" their area to new hires, highlighting what makes it special. Finally, assistance for housing was another

important rural-specific suggestion. Overall, the teachers we met with expressed a shared sentiment that rural schools would benefit from recruiting teachers who are open to and excited about being part of a rural community.

In addition to these concerns about and suggestions for the teacher shortage at the state-level, the teachers we spoke with also identified state standardized testing requirements as a major challenge. Sharon spoke for the group, saying, "we are all tired of ACAP standardized testing". Teachers revealed that they felt pressured to "teach to the test" over other important content. Additionally, they expressed concern that testing was being started too early.

Unfortunately, there were no easy solutions to the challenges that standardized testing brings, as the teachers we spoke to did not see any clear and better alternatives. It is possible that in the case of testing, solutions should be levied at reducing teacher stress and increasing flexibility in prep-requirements. One potential way to do this would be to move "test prep" outside of the regular classroom schedule, for example by creating a test prep period or providing weekend test-prep sessions.

Federal Policy Challenges and Opportunities

During the third focus group meeting, we asked the teachers present to share their views on major federal education policies and their impacts. The results to follow started as a discussion of federal education policy; however, it is important to note that some policy actions and suggestions may also relate to local and state policymaking, as it is often up to states and at times local districts to interpret and implement federal education policies.

When asked to share what major challenges related to federal policy their schools faced, the teachers we met with largely focused on challenges associated with accountability and the grading of schools. Federal pushes for accountability through No Child Left Behind, and now the Every Student Succeeds Act, have sparked the practice of "grading" schools. While the teachers we spoke with all acknowledged the value of accountability measures; many reported that they felt their school's "grades" were not reflective of the successes their students and faculty have seen. Sharon shared that "90% of students at her school go on to pursue a trade, rather than a college degree", in part because her school has a strong CTE program. Unfortunately, this success is not reflected in her school's grade or standardized testing scores. One solution offered up and supported by the teachers who participated in our study was that we take a more holistic approach when grading schools. Such a change would likely be especially beneficial for rural schools, where career readiness is a big focus.

Another interesting point that came from our focus group discussions of federal education policy intersected directly with our previous discussion of the teacher shortage. Wendy said it best when she mused, "How do we up student standards and lower teacher standards at the same time?". This comment further cements the need for new strategies for addressing the teacher shortage by recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in high-need areas, such as rural schools.

Community Partnerships

At the conclusion of this project, we held one final focus group meeting to ask our participants how community partners could contribute to the alleviation of the challenges their schools are currently facing. In rural areas, schools are often a pillar of the community, and as the saying goes, "it takes a village". One major community partnership resource that was identified during

our focus group sessions was regional universities. Regional universities, especially those located in rural areas, may be particularly suited to assist rural schools; however, they must take up the call to serve their neighboring K-12 schools through the development of strong partnerships.

Discussion

We approached this project with a desire to learn about contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural Alabama schools, as identified by rural Alabama teachers. The teachers we met with shared that some of the largest challenges their schools currently face include limited access to broadband and technology, COVID-19 related learning loss, increased stress associated with standardized testing, a shortage of highly qualified teachers and substitutes, and dissatisfaction with current accountability measures. Ultimately these challenges are ones that affect both rural and urban schools alike; however, it is important to remember that the uniqueness of the rural setting can cause urban-centric policies to be ineffective for rural schools, thereby necessitating specialized rural policy solutions.

While we hope our findings will prove relevant outside of the state of Alabama, we understand that our methods and research design do limit the generalizability of our findings. Because of this, we encourage others to replicate our methods in new places, with new groups of teachers. We argue that when policy makers begin to think of rural-centric solutions, they should take the time to consult with rural teachers, who can provide invaluable insight. The solutions shared by the rural teachers who participated in our study represent only the tip of the iceberg. Still, they are important because they shed light on feasible solutions that could help address the contemporary challenges rural schools face. In the future, continued discussions with rural teachers that dive deeper into individual challenges and opportunities will be an excellent resource.

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