

Out of the Loop

The unique needs of rural education are often obscured | Megan Lavalley

This article is excerpted from a report from the Center for Public Education, an initiative of the National School Boards Association.

American discourse is often accused of neglecting the interests and values of rural citizens, and this is particularly true when it comes to education. Rural students and the schools they attend receive little attention in either policy or academia. This is despite the fact that more than 46 million Americans live in nonmetropolitan areas.

No one seeks to minimize the problems of rural schools. But, at least from a national perspective, the unique needs of rural education are often obscured by their urban and suburban counterparts. One possible reason is that the majority of American students are educated in urban and suburban schools, which may lead policymakers to focus their attention and efforts on improving education where it will have the largest impact.

However, such a metropolitan-centric attitude neglects a significant portion of the student population. According to federal data, approximately one-half of school districts,

one-third of schools, and one-fifth of students in the United States are located in rural areas.

Another possible factor: rural students are not equally distributed across the country, and thus may not be at the front of the minds of policymakers and educators in all parts of the United States. According to data from 2014, the proportion of rural schools across the country varies widely — 80 percent of schools in South Dakota are in rural areas, for example, compared to only 6.5 percent of schools in Massachusetts.

Even so, taken in aggregate, rural students nationally make up a considerable portion of the student population. At the national level, approximately 19 percent of all students are enrolled in rural schools, but in 13 states, this proportion rises to more than one in three students (18.9 percent of Wisconsin students attend a rural school). The needs and successes of these students should be no less relevant to our national conversation than those of the potentially more visible students in metropolitan areas.

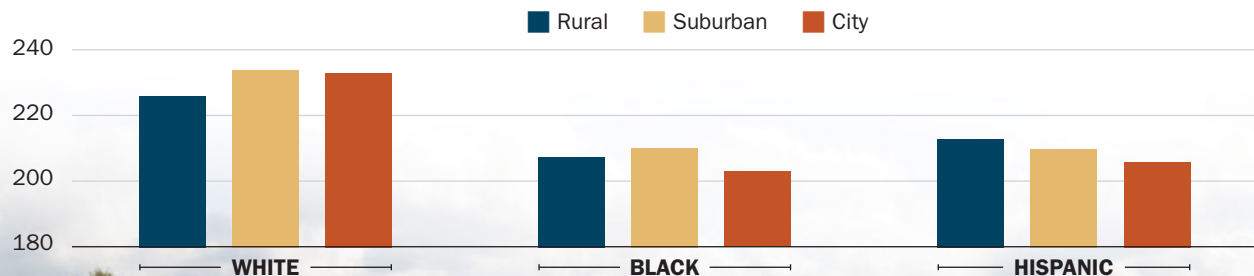
Clearly, the nation cannot afford to overlook the needs and circumstances of its rural schools. The days of the idyllic one-room schoolhouse are long gone. Or are they? Little is understood about rural schools and the unique challenges they face outside of the communities in which they operate. As an added complication, broad regional variations make it difficult to categorize all rural schools into a singular story, which spells trouble when cohesive messaging means attention.

We will attempt to shed badly needed light on these challenges, and point to policies and practices that can effectively address the distinctive needs of rural schools.

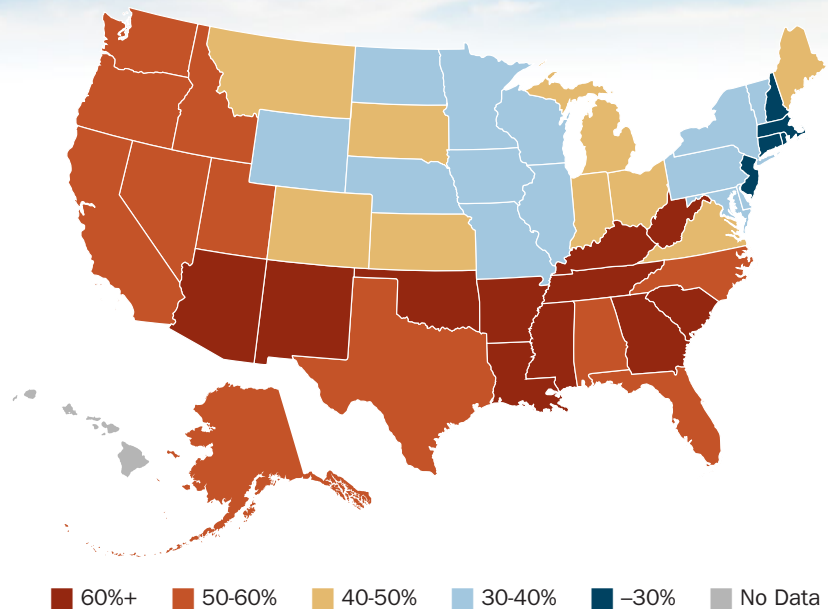
Deep and Persistent Poverty

Poverty is often associated with urban areas, but poverty in rural America actually exists at higher rates, is felt at deeper levels, and is more persistent than in metropolitan areas. Approximately 64 percent of rural counties have high rates of child poverty, as compared to

Reading by Grade 4 by race 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress



Percentage of students in rural districts eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch



Source: Showalter, Klein, Johnson & Hartman 2017. Data reflect NCES Common Core of Data, Public School Universe Survey 2013-13.

47 percent of urban counties.

More children in rural communities come from conditions of poverty than in the past. Today, more than half of the rural student population comes from a low-income family in 23 states — up from 16 states just two years ago.

Lower Literacy

Academic performance in rural schools has improved in recent years, with rural students now beginning to outscore their urban peers. Yet achievement gaps based on race are as present in rural schools as they are in other locales. Although narrower, a stark gap also exists between rural and suburban students.

Limited access to advanced courses shapes the curricular path of many rural students at the secondary level, and low rates of college attendance inhibit adult levels of educational attainment. Some of these phenomena may be influenced by the high levels of poverty present in rural areas while others may be driven by specific barriers inherent to a rural school, such as a small and dispersed student population.

Reading scores may reflect rural poverty due to the influence of home and family life on literacy. Rural students begin school with lower reading achievement than their suburban peers, and about the same as urban kindergartners. This gap continues through elementary and middle school in both mathematics

and reading and is widest between rural and suburban white students.

Interestingly, rural Hispanic students outperform their Hispanic peers in urban and suburban schools. As in these other locales, however, the most significant achievement gaps in rural schools are by race with white rural students outscoring their black and Hispanic classmates.

The effects of deep, persistent rural poverty must be considered as a possible factor in perpetuating these gaps. In fact, when socioeconomic status is held constant, the rural-suburban achievement gap is no longer distinguishable in reading

scores, suggesting that high levels of poverty in rural areas have a considerable impact on students' literacy.

Barriers Facing the Rural Teacher

While a variety of tools attempt to measure teacher quality, the most complete picture comes from examining a number of indicators together. Collectively, a teacher's selectivity of college attended, performance on standardized tests, level of degree and experience, and credentialing status can lend insight to teacher quality.

Across the United States, rural teachers graduate from less selective colleges than those in all other

What is 'Rural?'

Though there are a number of definitions, this report uses the National Center for Education Statistics locale codes. These definitions below categorize the nation's schools based upon a combination of population size and distance from the nearest metropolitan area.

Fringe = Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

Distant = Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Remote = Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

locales. In addition, the better qualified teachers tend not to return to their rural schools. Research from Kentucky, for example, shows that both metropolitan teachers and rural teachers with superior academic qualifications were less likely to be employed in rural Appalachian schools.

It should be noted that, on average, teachers in rural areas have more years of experience and are less likely to have obtained their credentials through alternative certification

methods than teachers in urban areas. Despite these advantages when compared against the urban setting, rural schools employ slightly more novice teachers.

Additionally, teachers from rural areas are less likely to have a master's degree than teachers from a metropolitan area. There is a 10-percentage point gap in master's degree attainment between suburban and rural teachers, and the likelihood of teacher postgraduate education decreases as a community's isolation increases.

On the whole, several indicators suggest that rural teachers may come to the classroom with a less selective educational background than their urban and suburban peers, which may negatively impact the learning of the students that they teach.

■ **Balancing the Books**

Consolidation is often promoted as an effort to share costs and resources across a region with a very disperse student population. In these areas, it may be impractical and expensive

“Gaining and Maintaining Young People in Wisconsin Communities”

Researchers at the Applied Population Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison released a report, “Gaining and Maintaining Young People in Wisconsin Communities,” in December 2017.

Between the fall of 2015 to the summer of 2016, the researchers did demographic work that studied all Wisconsin municipalities (cities, villages, and towns) to identify communities gaining and maintaining young adult populations. They measured communities that are gaining by looking at the absolute number of people aged 20-39, in five-year cohorts, for census years 1990, 2000, and 2010. They measured communities that are maintaining by looking at the proportional size of the young adult population, on average, across those census years.

From the fall of 2016 to the summer of 2017, they conducted interviews in 12 case study communities that were gaining and maintaining young adults, representing all regions of the state, to learn why people thought young adult populations were stronger in those places. Here are some of their findings.

▶ **DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

The demographic research yielded three important findings:

- Only about 15 percent of Wisconsin communities are gaining and maintaining young adults.
- Communities in Wisconsin's most urban area — Milwaukee county — fare as bad or worse than many rural areas in losing young adults.
- Communities that are gaining and maintaining young adults are much more likely to be near cities and freeways.

▶ **CASE STUDY RESEARCH**

The case study research yielded five important qualities of communities that are important for attracting young adults:

- Perceived quality of schools.
- Perceived appropriate affordability of housing — young adults at different life stages may define affordability differently.
- Outdoor amenities such as parks and trails, with appreciation for both motorized and silent (skiing, hiking, etc.) outdoor recreation.
- A small-town sense of community and civic engagement.
- Proximity to cities that offered employment, entertainment, and shopping.

▶ **CONCLUSIONS**

- Maintaining high-quality schools is essential for attracting and maintaining young adult populations.
- Different communities need to provide different mixes of housing for different families at different life cycle stages.
- Public outdoor amenities for a diversity of recreation activities will be valued by young adults.
- Rural and small-town development may be tied together with urban development.
- Communities need to address the tensions created by the need for volunteerism to maintain the small-town feel, while people spend large amounts of time in cities for jobs, entertainment, and shopping.
- Universities and colleges may influence not just their home city, but also the region as a place for graduates to settle.

For more information and to access the full report, visit apl.wisc.edu/shared/youngadults

Among the most significant barriers rural schools face is inadequate funding.

to maintain redundant services, teachers and facilities.

Consolidating, in theory, saves money for districts by minimizing duplication of high-cost items like administration and food service in each small community. For rural areas facing budgetary constraints, this may be an appealing method to relieve some financial burden without sacrifices to instruction.

For these reasons, consolidation was a favored organizational strategy in the mid-20th century. However, more recent research does not quite support its use. With the possible exception of the very smallest schools, modern consolidation efforts actually save little money for districts. An analysis shows that expenses are likely to remain stable or, in some cases, even rise after consolidation due to increased expenses in the areas of transportation and mid-level administration.

Transportation is a large line item for consolidated rural schools, which often require students to be bused across long distances from a large attendance area, often spanning an entire county. Though consolidated schools may pool resources at a county or regional level, they are faced with hefty transportation budgets due to the cost of busing students to the regional school.

More than half of West Virginia's schools are considered rural, for example, but are consolidated along county lines which often span hundreds of square miles. Consequently, West Virginia's schools must rely heavily on busing students long distances and thus contend with the lowest ratio of instructional to transportation dollars in the U.S.

This unbalanced ratio is common to consolidated rural schools, and may be detrimental to students aca-

demically. Because an increased portion of a consolidated school's budget is dedicated to transportation, less money can be directed toward instruction. Additionally, larger school size may disadvantage students academically, decrease extra-curricular participation, and lower graduation rates. This all may mean that an attempt to balance the budget could have significant negative consequences for student learning.

■ Less Funding

Among the most significant barriers rural schools face is inadequate funding. On average, rural districts receive just 17 percent of state education funding. Considering that one in two districts is rural and serve one in five students — and that many face challenges of high poverty rates, a growing ELL population, and hard-to-fill-staff positions — this distribution is severely lacking.

Competitive grant opportunities, which could supplement state and local dollars, are impractical for many rural schools. The grant application process requires a substantial amount of work from specially trained staff. Due to the small administrative staff common in rural districts, however, there is often no one experienced or available to complete a lengthy grant application.

Even funding based upon formulas may create inequalities for rural schools. Rural districts, which tend to have small student populations, have been found to be disadvantaged by the Title I funding formula, which emphasizes the number of students in poverty over the portion of a school's students that are in poverty. Even among student populations with a higher poverty rate, a small district receives less money.

Rural schools not only receive

smaller awards than their metropolitan equivalents, but they also receive funding less frequently. Before the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a majority (58 percent) of School Improvement Grants were given to urban schools, while just 18 percent were given to rural schools. These awardees in sum represent approximately 2 percent of all urban schools and just 0.5 percent of all rural schools, suggesting a great disparity in SIG award distribution. The pattern of past awardees reflects a perspective and funding prioritization clearly weighted toward metropolitan issues.

■ Question for School District Leaders

Do you have a plan for dealing with staff shortages? Are you able to provide incentives to attract well-qualified teachers and principals? Are they effective?

Have you sought partnerships with local colleges and universities? Do you collaborate on providing professional development for your staff as well as “grow your own teachers” strategies?

Do you have the infrastructure and bandwidth to support virtual learning? Are you set up with sufficient computers and staff to effectively blend online and face-to-face instruction?

Are there local, regional or state consortiums you can join or launch to address specific issues related to your community (food scarcity, healthcare access, lack of transportation)? Do you work with your state and local representatives, as well as your professional associations, to advocate for your community's needs? ■

Megan Lavalley is a former research analyst for the Center for Public Education.

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