

# States Could Do More for Rural Education

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In recent years, worries about America's public education system have focused on the country's large urban population of low-income, black, and Hispanic children who enter first grade at a disadvantage and fall farther behind the longer they are in school. States, foundations, and the federal government are pouring billions of dollars into various efforts to improve education in big cities. Current controversies about charter schools, mayoral and state takeovers, union influence, and closing and replacing low-performing schools have focused in big cities and on the disadvantaged children they serve.

All of this makes sense. But from the perspective of our national health and sustaining an opportunity society, Americans are missing a bet. Children in rural areas can be as isolated as urban minority children from the mainstream economy and from the higher education that is the gateway to the best jobs. And there are vast numbers of them. Even after the dramatic rural to urban migration in the mid-twentieth century, more children (5.6 million) attend schools in remote rural and small town areas than in the 20 largest urban school districts.

### Defining Rural

The U.S. Census Bureau defines a rural area via negatives: it is neither a city with a population of 50,000 or more, nor a cluster of towns and cities with a minimum of 2,500 people each and a maximum of 50,000 people each.<sup>1</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) starts with the Census definition and then defines three kinds of rural areas:

1. Fringe: 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.
2. Distant: 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.
3. Remote: more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.<sup>2</sup>

These definitions are necessary, especially for analysts using hard data to track economic and population changes. But rurality is more than simply an attribute of place. It is an attribute of people who do certain kinds of work (e.g., farming) or have certain relationships to land and community. It is also a set of attitudes about tradition, close-knit community, a relaxed pace, and a preference for recreation in wild and unpopulated areas. These ways of being rural are not perfectly associated with the hard, data-based distinctions used by the Census, the Office of Management and Budget, or NCES. People can be "rural" in attitude and modes of employment even if they live in technically urban places (e.g., metropolitan counties) that contain undeveloped areas and small towns.

This chapter makes the case for why rural education should become a priority for state governments. Rural school systems and their students deserve attention, and states are uniquely positioned to support their improvement.

### WHY FOCUS ON RURAL SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS?

There are three reasons state education agencies (SEAs) must shift their attention toward rural schools and districts. First, schools in rural areas educate millions of students.<sup>3</sup> One student in ten is educated in a remote or fringe district. In half of the states, rural students make up more than one-quarter of the total student population. In six states (Mississippi, Vermont, Maine, North Carolina, South Dakota, and South Carolina), more than 40 percent of the students are rural. There are only eight states in which rural children make up less than 10 percent of the student population (Maryland, New Jersey, Utah, Rhode Island, Nevada, California, Massachusetts, and Hawaii). Moreover, rural student populations in many states include high proportions of minority and poor students whose education has long been a primary focus of federal policy and major philanthropies. In 18 states, more than 25 percent of rural students are black or Hispanic; in 24 states, more than 40 percent of rural students are poor.

Second, the talents of the most capable rural young people are less likely to be fully developed compared to their urban and suburban peers. Despite the fact that rural students, on average, perform better in high school and graduate at a higher rate than students in big cities (79.9 percent vs. 64.1 percent), they are less likely to attend college (33.4 percent vs. 48.1 percent) and far less likely to enroll in graduate and professional programs (3.2 percent vs. 7.6 percent) after college.<sup>4</sup> At a time when the U.S. economy is suffering from a shortage of highly skilled individuals (and from high unemployment among low-skilled workers), rural young people's lack of access to or participation in higher education is a serious matter.

Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery have written about the existence of untapped sources of talent in the United States, especially among young people from low-income families and areas remote from major cities.<sup>5</sup> They critique elite colleges and universities that compete with one another for a tapped-out population of extremely capable students in metro areas and overlook the large pool of capable students elsewhere. They conclude that “the number of low-income, high-achieving students is much greater than college admissions staff generally believe.” These

students “come from districts too small to support selective public high schools, are not in a critical mass of fellow high achievers, and are not likely to encounter a teacher or schoolmate from an older cohort who attended a selective college.” If the pool of prospective students is to be expanded, it must be found in places, including rural areas, which previously have not been mined for extremely capable students.

Talented young people in rural areas are not the only ones being wasted. Young people in rural areas are much more likely to be idle—meaning not engaged in education or training, not working, and not earning regular income—across the board. This problem is especially acute for rural black and Native American youth, particularly in the West or Southeast. Nearly half of rural high-school dropouts from low-income families (48.5 percent) are idle.<sup>6</sup>

Third, rural schools and districts need the kinds of help that state governments can provide but often don’t. Rural schools and districts need policy flexibility to tailor laws and regulations—made with big-city schools in mind—to the needs of educators working in small, often isolated localities. Rural schools and districts also need investment funds to adapt to sudden changes in enrollment, learn how to educate newcomers (e.g., newly settled Hispanic migrants in the West), and exploit technology (see the rural education and technology essay in this volume). The most isolated districts also need better access to teacher training and leadership advice via state-supported support networks and online resources.

## RURAL LEADERS NEED HELP

Rural school districts must educate children in every grade, help children who fall behind and motivate the gifted, and provide special education services, transportation, and extracurricular activities. In this, they are like big urban districts. But unlike their urban counterparts, rural districts have access to only a small slice of the teacher labor pool available elsewhere in the state and have particular difficulty attracting and keeping the ablest teachers.

By virtue of their small size, rural districts put tremendous strain on superintendents. It is not uncommon for superintendents to play a large number of roles, from driving buses, teaching, and serving as the chief compliance officer and paperwork wrangler for all federal and state programs. As one superintendent put it, “I’m it! I don’t have any support staff like the guys running the large districts. They can delegate the work to staff. But I have to turn in the same reports as they do. It takes a lot of time.”

Leaders of rural districts are paid much less than their big-city counterparts, but have to wear many more hats, personally manage issues that would elsewhere be left to human resource specialists, and act as political figures and civic coalition builders.<sup>7</sup> Many are particularly challenged by shrinking economic bases, expensive transportation services, dilapidated or antiquated facilities, and local resistance to taxation.

In isolated rural places, schools serve as the locus for community activities. As mainline churches have consolidated parishes and pulled clergy back into larger towns and cities, school auditoriums, often the largest and best space in town, host such special events as town meetings, memorial services, even retirement parties. And yet, in some rural districts these facilities have aged and deteriorated, becoming millstones around the district's fiscal neck. They can sap resources and open up difficult issues about whether to close a facility that has served an important community purpose. Facilities problems can also make it difficult for a community to find a good superintendent. As one said, "Think about that. With an attitude like that in a community [where people won't pass a building levy], how do you get a good superintendent to go there?"

It's no wonder that many of the best rural leaders will, given the opportunity, leave for better-paid and supported superintendencies in larger jurisdictions. This is a common theme among small-district leaders. In political terms, they need help in reducing this burden, a key factor in superintendent burnout.<sup>8</sup> Declared one weary superintendent: "The state education department needs to become much more user-friendly."

## UNIQUE LEADERSHIP DEMANDS

Much has been written about the challenges of leadership in larger, urban school systems. Urban leaders must deal with extremely complex communities that have large numbers of mobilized interest groups including parents, teachers, and businesses. Superintendents are political figures, but are seldom as potent or experienced—or as responsible for the whole community—as big city mayors, councilmen, and members of the state legislature. They must master large bureaucracies and answer to school boards that include politically ambitious individuals who aspire to higher office. They are also likely to be actively covered by newspapers and TV.

The challenges facing rural leaders are different.<sup>9</sup> District leaders can be the most prominent public figures in their towns. They can't be

anonymous or leave thinking about population declines or the local economy to others. Though rural districts lack complex interest group environments or big bureaucracies, some groups (e.g., the American Farm Bureau Federation) can be well organized and demanding. Rural district leaders can also come under the influence of a few individuals who think of themselves as owners of the community.

To be successful, the superintendent of a small rural school district must possess high-end political skills. They must earn the respect of staff and citizenry, identify which issues and initiatives to address and those whose time has not yet come, build coalitions in support of necessary actions, co-opt or neutralize opponents, and micro-manage day-to-day activities while at the same time contemplating and attending to matters at the macro level of long-term strategic importance. What's more, the superintendent must do these things with scant resources—often with little or no staff support and no ability to hire consultants or give money to supportive community groups. All this must be done in a fishbowl environment in which virtually every action or inaction, whether in professional or personal life, is on display.

### THE BURDENS OF ISOLATION

Superintendents in rural areas are often on their own. There may be no universities or major corporations in their territories from which to draw specialized help. There may be few civic organizations to provide volunteer enrichment programs. Rural superintendents do not have access to local foundations for special resources. Most urban superintendents can turn to at least some outside institutions for support and rely on well-staffed central offices to apply for competitive grants. These things are frequently not possible in remote districts in the majority of America's rural communities.

Geographic remoteness cannot be entirely overcome by the Internet, Skype, or videoconferencing. District leaders, in part because they are so loaded up with work, acknowledge very little contact with colleagues in other localities and with the state. Those near metropolitan areas have more opportunities for collaboration, but in more remote areas this is extremely difficult. Further, unlike urban superintendents who are expected to take part in regional and national events, rural leaders are expected to stay at home. Those who do travel can be charged with extravagance and indulging in “boondoggles.”

Isolated communities are also small. Aside from farms, isolated communities may have only three to five businesses and only one, or no, church. This does not allow for a large pool of people with business or

nonprofit experience to serve on the school board or to provide advice and support to the superintendent.

Isolated rural educators simply do not have the same opportunities to develop the professional connections and contacts that translate into influence with the state department of education or the legislature. One superintendent said the fact that he had worked in state government before becoming head of a small, rural school district meant he knew at least some people in the state capitol. He understood the workings of state government and could, when needed, pick up the phone and talk with someone he knew. He added that others without his unique background likely could not do the same.

Support for rural districts varies tremendously from state to state. In some states, like Idaho, no regional service centers exist to provide managerial help, services to special needs students, and in-service training for teachers. The neighboring state of Washington has addressed this problem through its regional Education Service Districts (ESD). These entities provide technical assistance ranging from compliance matters involving state and federal law, counseling in matters of finance and new initiatives, and help locating specialist consultants.

Some superintendents in isolated but not extremely remote districts have formed alliances with their peers in other small districts. These arrangements provide collegial support and, in some cases, shared resources: in one instance, four isolated districts shared the only qualified chemistry teacher in their rural county. However, face-to-face meetings require a great deal of driving and coordination, and consume a great deal of time.

Isolation isn't just physical: it is also political and psychological. Unlike urban districts whose performance and fiscal soundness can draw the attention of the governor and key legislators, small rural districts can be orphans. A superintendent in a remote place with few inhabitants may have no particular allies in the state capitol. Even their state representatives know that votes are few in the remotest areas, and their time and travel costs are high.

## WHAT STATES CAN DO

As states engage more closely with rural districts, they will inevitably learn more about them and generate new ideas about how to help. This chapter (and those that follow) can only prime the pump, anticipating better ideas to develop as smart people engage real problems. But for starters, states should consider the following ideas.

**Flexibility in funding statutes and categorical programs.** Rural districts, which often have only one professional employee in the central office, have great difficulty managing multiple categorical programs, ensuring compliance with each one, and filling out all the application and progress reporting paperwork. SEAs need to work with their own legislatures and the federal government to consolidate programs and paperwork. States also need to identify aspects of federal and state regulation that are counterproductive in rural contexts and ask for changes or waivers. For example, rural districts, which must employ individual teachers in many different roles, struggle with the “fully qualified teacher” provisions of No Child Left Behind, which discourages use of such generalists. Other elements of NCLB, such as the requirement that children in a failing school have the right to transfer to another school, are dead letters in many isolated rural areas because no such schools exist. Rural districts need pressure to find new solutions to the problems of disadvantaged children, but impossible mandates don’t help.

**Incentives to share resources, including staff, facilities, and courses.** Districts need the financial flexibility to barter or pay one another for staff and facilities, use community facilities rather than dedicated school buildings, admit and issue credits to one another’s students, and share good professional development experiences. They should also be free to pay more than full time for teachers taking on unusual responsibilities (e.g., working in two districts some distance apart). Flexibility of this sort is particularly important in geographic areas where there might be only one qualified science or math teacher. Rural districts should also be free to waive licensing and salary scales in order to hire individuals with unconventional education—for example, a license in engineering but no mathematics certification—when certified teachers have much less substantive knowledge.

**Unconventional training and career development opportunities.** States could provide incentive funding in return for commitments from superintendents and teachers to stay on the job in their district for an extended period of time: enriched professional development and perhaps even year-long, fully paid sabbaticals for superintendents and teachers in hard-to-fill subject disciplines. Superintendents in neighboring districts might job share to allow each other to take extended sabbaticals.

**Getting the voices of rural leaders heard in the state capitol.** Some rural districts are too small and isolated even to attract candidates for the legislature. The commercial and anti-tax interests in a remote community may be far better represented than education. That, coupled with citizens’ reluctance to pay for travel, can exacerbate rural educators’ sense of professional isolation and lack of power. An SEA can pay (via



its own funds or philanthropic donations) for rural district leaders to travel to the state capitol, build a joint policy agenda, and meet with their legislators. This can establish channels of communication that rural educators need and help alert policymakers to problems caused by urban-oriented regulations. It can also encourage legislators to more aggressively represent their smallest constituencies.

**These possibilities only scratch the surface.** State officials can rightly say that district leaders have more flexibility than they know; for example, to adjust staffing patterns or to purchase online services with funds earmarked for salaries or professional development. But working in isolation, many rural leaders struggle to distinguish among hard legal requirements, changeable procedures, and real or imaginary constraints. Rural leaders need people in the state agency to talk with, and to help them find ways of doing what their children and communities need. A distant or legalistic relationship might work for big urban districts, with their own dedicated lobbyists, lawyers, and elected officials. But rural leaders need the kind of leadership that they themselves provide: personal, case-specific, and focused on solutions, not rules.

Finally, it must be said that state legislators should increase their presence and familiarity with the trials, tribulations, and potential of the state's small, rural school districts. Their infrequent visits—not to mention the absence of these elected leaders—is a deficit that demands correcting. Rural educators, including board members, in remote communities may not be miracle-workers, but they sometimes come close. With some fresh, concentrated attention, many of the problems confronting these communities could be overcome, or at least ameliorated.

## ENDNOTES

1. “Urban and Rural Classification,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, [www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html).
2. “Rural Education in America,” National Center for Education Statistics, Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2006, [www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp](http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp).
3. Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2012 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).
4. Four-year graduation rates: large cities 64.1%, rural 79.9%, suburban 80.7; total enrollment in colleges and universities: large cities 48.1%, rural 33.4%, suburban 43.0%; enrollment in graduate and professional programs: urban 7.6%, rural 3.2%, suburban 5.9% (with rates for males alone 6.8%, 2.2%, and 5.0%, respectively). See Susan Aud et al., *The Condition of Education*, 2013 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).
5. Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, “The “Missing “One-Offs”: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students.” Paper presented at the Brookings Panel on Economic Activity, Washington DC, March 21-22, 2013.
6. Anastasia Snyder and Diane McLaughlin, *Rural Youth Are More Likely to Be Idle*, Paper 36 (Durham, NH: The Carsey School of Public Policy at the Scholars’ Repository, 2008).
7. Educational Research Service, National Survey of Salaries and Wages in Public Schools, 2005-06.
8. On issues of turnover and superintendent pipeline development, see Stephen L. Jacobson, “Effective Superintendents of Small, Rural Districts,” *Journal of Rural and Small Schools* 2, no. 2 (1988): 17-21; Mary Jean Ronan Herzog and Robert Pittman, “The Nature of Rural Schools: Trends, Perceptions and Values,” in *Leadership for Rural Schools: Lessons for All*, ed. Donald M. Chalker (Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co., 1999); Geoffrey J. Tagg, “The Trials and Tribulations of a Rural Superintendent.” Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Association of School Administrators, New Orleans, 1982.
9. See Tod Allen Farmer, “Unique Rural District Politics,” *The Rural Educator* 30, no. 2 (2009): 29-33; see also Kathleen Budge, “Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem, Privilege, and Possibility,” *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 21, no. 13 (Dec 2006): 1-10.