

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A FOCUS ON RURAL SCHOOLS



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Despite the national attention on improving student achievement emerging from the No Child Left Behind Act, many rural schools continue to face a host of challenges. Poverty, insufficient financing, isolation, an inadequate pool of qualified teachers, and high turnover among teachers and administrators continue to be major issues (Arnold 2000). Given this context, Beeson and Strange (2003) rank West Virginia's status on rural education issues as being *crucially important* to its children's education.

Rural school systems operate in a dichotomy. Lee and McIntire (2000) report that "rural schools have both facilitative (e.g. small class size, supportive ethos, and safe / orderly climate) and constraining (e.g. lack of enough well-trained teachers / instructional resources and low availability of advanced courses) conditions" (p. 3). Dunn (2001) agrees with Lee and McIntire in that the benefits of rural schools are most often felt at the classroom level, but the problems are most prevalent at the district level. Barker (1985) agreed when he stated that "the challenge of maintaining the benefits of smallness, while at the same time providing the diversity and breadth in program offerings is one that needs more attention" (p. 37). While many authors espouse the benefits of rural schools, most agree that several innate disadvantages are prevalent in rural systems.

The dilemma of rural education is a critical issue for West Virginia. The state ranks third in the nation in the number (53.9%) of people living in rural communities. Nearly 46% of West Virginia students are enrolled in a rural school compared with 21% of the students nationwide. The *rural per capita income* in WV (in the year 2000) was \$15,177 compared with a national level of \$19,285 *per capita*, ranking West Virginia the lowest in the nation in this category. Over 40% of West Virginia's rural schools reported declining enrollments between the years 1996 to 2000 (Beeson & Strange, 2003).

Challenges for Rural Systems

The rural school systems of today typically operate in sparsely populated geographic regions which often creates problems in several categories. Many states (West Virginia included) have a vital need for attention to policies that affect rural education. The problems facing West Virginia's rural schools are so acute that Beeson and Strange (2003) rated the state eighth in the nation in the urgency with which policy makers should address the special problems of rural education.

Poor Physical Facilities

The very nature of rural school systems (sparse population), coupled with school funding formulas (dependent upon tax base), suggests that these systems are at an immediate disadvantage when compared with non-rural schools (Phillips, 2003). The availability of very limited economic development only intensifies the situation. Rural systems are typically burdened with poor physical facilities (Lee, 2001). Rural (small) school systems' budgets are typically distributed over a larger area causing the fixed costs of maintaining physical plants to be higher based on per pupil expenditures (Sherman, 1992). The result is a failure to properly maintain existing facilities. This lack of appropriate facilities amplifies and reinforces many other problems such as low student expectations and difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers.

Fewer Classroom Resources

Students in rural schools typically do not have access to equivalent classroom resources that non-rural students are provided (Barker, 1985; Lee & McIntire, 2000). Covering the fixed costs of providing a meaningful educational experience is expensive. The level of expenditures for classroom resources has been positively linked to higher student outcomes (Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994). Khattri, Riley and Kane (1997) reported that rural systems typically have a small tax base and this "leads to tight budgets that often translate into limited curricular and program offerings, lower teacher salaries, and a lack of sufficient technology resources, leading many to argue that rural students are not receiving the quality curriculum and education they need to compete nationally and globally" (p.90).

Lack of Qualified Teachers

The effect of *quality teaching* has received a great deal of attention during the past few years. Nowhere is the disparity in the availability of qualified teachers more observable than in rural school systems. Most rural school researchers agree that rural systems have a less qualified pool of applicants from which to select teachers. Recent research has identified several factors which may contribute to this inequity.

Salary inequity. Smaller salary offerings are often cited as a major deterrent to adequately staffing rural schools (Beeson & Strange 2003; Collins, 1999; Khattri et al, 1997; McClure, Redfield & Hammer, 2003; Roellke, 2003; Schwartzbeck, Redfield, Morris & Hammer, 2003; Stern, 1994). Rural teachers typically earn about 13% less than teachers in non-rural districts (Jimerson, 2003).

Multiple teaching assignments. Rural middle and high school teachers are often required to teach multiple subjects, frequently without certification in at least one field, whereas larger urban systems are more likely to have the fiscal resources to employ in-field specialists (Phillips, 2003; Reck, 1990; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003; Trahan, 2004). Reeves (2003) reported that "for

rural schools, teaching out of field is an issue of economies of scale. Small high schools cannot afford to hire teachers to cover one class each of higher level math and science courses, nor do they have sufficient numbers of students to demand it” (p. 9). The “out of field” assignment of teachers places many rural systems in jeopardy with the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation in that in order to be rated as “highly qualified”, a teacher must demonstrate subject matter competence in each of the core academic subjects that they teach (McClure et al.; Phillips, 2003). The initial consequence of requiring ‘highly qualified’ status of teachers for rural districts has prompted the U.S. Department of Education to recently revisit the requirements as they pertain to rural districts. The need for teachers to teach in more than one content field may also make rural teaching jobs less attractive than those situations offering a single subject assignment.

Teacher supply. The decreasing pool of experienced teachers and high turnover rates of new teachers cause rural systems to struggle to find highly qualified candidates to fill vacancies (Arnold, 2000; Collins, 1999; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003). Rural communities must also address social isolation as a factor when recruiting new teachers (McClure et al., 2003; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003). Professional isolation is also an oft cited reason for new teachers shunning rural positions (Collins, 1999; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Stern, 1994). Finally, geographic isolation offers a challenge to recruiters for rural systems in that rural living is often not attractive to new teachers from non-rural backgrounds (Lee, 2001; Reeves, 2003). As the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act are enacted, the search for highly qualified teachers will result in an increased demand which may result in higher salaries, leaving the rural system at a distinct disadvantage (Reeves, 2003).

School / Community Relationships

The connection between the rural school and the local community has been identified as one of the most important assets of rural schools (Khattri et al., 1997). Researchers have established a relationship between community employment opportunities (local job market) and the quality of schools in rural areas (Smith & DeYoung, 1992). Employment opportunities are typically marginal at best in rural communities. Having numerous employment opportunities in a community encourages the advancement of educational opportunities. Carter (1999) stated that “when major employers need an educated workforce, they tend to support quality schooling. This support is reinforced by the participation of educated parents. However, when local employment opportunities are insufficient, the well educated tend to leave the area” (p. 2). Raising the level and quality of education in rural communities is critical to the establishment of stable economic development.

High school completion rates tend to be lower in rural communities (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2003) reported that in the year 2000, 23.2% of non-metro (rural) adults 25 years and older did not have a high school diploma as compared to a rate of 18.7% for metro adults.

Student Expectations

Rural students have a slightly lower high school graduation rate (7% lower) than urban students (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Consequently, it is not surprising that fewer rural students go on to higher education (Khattri, et al. 1997; Phillips, 2003; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2003). Cobb, McIntire and Pratt (1989) reported that rural students are often faced with low parent and teacher expectations, thus they tend to have lower educational aspirations than urban or suburban students. In rural areas, where the job market is limited, the connection between education and earning power is often not seen (nor valued) by rural youth and their families.

Ability to Comply with NCLB

Seal and Harmon (1995) articulated the problems experienced by rural systems when they stated that “rural school districts must implement education reform in the context of scarcity” (p. 120). The problems unique to rural systems are often amplified by the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. Rural schools face a much greater challenge in building the capacity to meet the mandates of NCLB (McClure et al., 2003; Reeves, 2003; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003).

The task of providing a highly qualified teacher for every classroom has particular implications for the rural system. The rural system’s ability to offer a competitive salary in relation to more urban or wealthier systems is a major concern (Reeves, 2003). The ability to hire content specialists in high demand areas (math, science and foreign languages) offers acute challenges for most rural systems (Reeves; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003).

Rural systems are having difficulty meeting the school accountability mandates levied by the NCLB legislation (Reeves, 2003). Small schools are also more often labeled as “needing improvement” due to the character of school level reporting (small sample cells). Kane, Staiger and Geppert (2002) report that “small schools are over represented among those with extremely low test scores” (p.7).

Summary

West Virginia needs to examine the status of rural education in the state. The No Child Left Behind Act requires closer scrutiny of the policies that affect rural school systems. Children in West Virginia’s rural schools may be at risk of failing to get a quality education.

Policy Implications for Rural School Systems

- Create a system for facilitating local (rural) input into the educational process.
- Implement and support an ongoing research agenda focusing on *rural issues*.
- Use technology to deliver hard to staff courses over a broader spectrum of rural locations.
- Promote innovative teacher *recruitment* practices.
 - Develop targeted marketing for future teachers (middle and high school level).
 - Develop “grow your own” teacher programs.
 - Nurture local (rural) teacher education candidates.
- Support creative teacher *retention* practices.
 - Develop student loan forgiveness programs for teachers willing to staff rural schools.
 - Develop higher salary structures in rural systems.
 - Encourage and support National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certification.
 - Provide high quality staff development relevant to rural education issues.
 - Encourage community involvement in new teacher orientation processes.
- Critically examine the missions of schools of teacher education.
 - Investigate the creation of a school(s) of education with a differentiated mission focusing on rural education.
 - Develop school administrator certification programs which focus on rural administration issues.
 - Provide cost effective distance education courses to teachers in rural areas to provide quality professional development.
 - Increase cooperation between higher education schools of education and local school districts.

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