

**The Children Our Country has Forgotten:  
An Examination of the Current State of Rural Education in the United States**  
Public Intellectual Essay by Christa Frintner

Despite this country's declared dedication to leaving no child behind, there is a group of students we often overlook. The problem is not simply that this group is underprivileged, but that it falls under the radar of most people so that there is very little public discourse about the issue. This group is comprised of the students who attend rural schools in America. A rural community is often defined as one with fewer than 25,000 people. Children in these communities make up 27% of school aged students. Even a more stringent definition of rural-- fewer than 2,500 people--puts the number of students in rural schools at 19% of the school-going population, or 8.8 million children (Johnson v). There are a number of barriers rural schools face, such as problems with teacher recruitment and retention, demands of "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation without extra funding, and a wide range of local/regional concerns.

The following is a brief overview of the current status of rural education, particularly as it pertains to these issues (which certainly are not the only obstacles facing rural schools). With this information, I begin to explore some options for addressing these issues. I suggest focusing on rural schools' strengths and using available technology to attract and keep qualified teachers. In addition, for rural schools to succeed, I believe the federal government needs to provide more support, both financially and through a revision of legislature (particularly NCLB).

***Get the Picture: What Makes Rural Schools Unique***

One challenge in making policy decisions about rural schools is that they are very different from urban and suburban counterparts. Their differences have both positive and

negative implications, and it is important to recognize these so that positive aspects can be used to schools' advantage and problems can be addressed effectively.

### **Life is Good: Positive Qualities**

There are many encouraging characteristics of rural schools. The small, personalized setting makes them conducive to learning. In fact, "...some research indicates that rural schools perform better than their urban or suburban counterparts. The reasons provided for this pattern are related to small school size, the orderly climate of the school, parental involvement, community support, teacher attentiveness, and more leadership opportunities for students" (Beck 2). Because these schools have unique, small groups of students, there is the opportunity for every student to receive a significant amount of attention. Beck also notes the "safe/orderly climate" often found in rural settings (2). This also grows out of the small, tight-knit groups of students.

In addition to benefiting their students, rural schools play significant roles in their communities. Unlike in metropolitan areas, there are not many other civic gathering places nearby, so especially in the smallest towns, schools are crucial to community life. They "...serve as social and cultural centers. They are places for sports, theater, music, and other civic activities...[and] serve as symbols of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal community identity" (Peshkin). Lyson conducted a study of New York rural schools examining two sizes of rural communities: those with 500 or less people and those with populations between 501 and 2,500. He found that in "...the smallest rural communities, the presence of a school is associated with many social and economic benefits," such as higher housing values and lower income inequality and welfare

dependence (136). Similarly, “In the larger rural communities, the benefits of a school are also apparent...” (Lyson 136). So, the presence of a school has an impact.

### **Good Things Come with a Price: Challenging Aspects**

Rural schools face a number of challenges that do not always affect their urban and suburban counterparts in the same way. “We know that rural schools may suffer from some poor educational conditions (e.g., sparse population bases, isolation, limited economic development, and restricted educational opportunities)” (Beck 2). Often, rural areas are economically disadvantaged, and they lack many nearby resources that help city and suburban schools attract qualified teachers. Current high-stakes testing policies, too, pose problems for rural schools.

#### *Attracting and Retaining Teachers:*

A common problem in rural areas is attracting and retaining qualified teachers. “According to the National Teacher Recruitment Clearinghouse (2001), teacher shortages are particularly acute in urban and rural areas, where there is an immediate need to fill teaching positions in all areas...” (Harmon 2) For rural schools, there are not the same attractions urban districts have to offer in terms of connections and nearby resources/opportunities. A 1992-1993 survey more specifically cites the lack of social life, isolation, lack of services in the community, high workload, lack of money, no willingness to relocate, and no low cost housing option as some deterring factors (Harmon 6). These can especially affect young, new teachers’ decisions.

Another reason it is difficult to find teachers is that teaching in a rural setting requires certain unique attitudes and abilities. Lemke says, “The ‘ideal’ rural teacher is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, can teach students with a wide

range of abilities in the same classroom, is prepared to supervise extracurricular activities, and can adjust to the community.” Whereas teachers in larger districts may do best as specialists who can manage a large group of students on a somewhat impersonal level, rural teachers need to have a more universal outlook and act as a community member. For this reason, Collins says, “. . .to recruit rural teachers means administrators must target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas.” In other words, those who have some experience in these settings often adjust most easily.

### *Dealing with No Child Left Behind*

No Child Left Behind places high demands on all public schools, but its mandates are felt extremely strongly in rural settings. Between needing to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on states’ standardized tests, the call for specific teacher qualifications, lack of funding, and the suggested safety nets that cater to urban and suburban communities, this law raises many issues. Although there are some measures in place to help districts adjust, many people argue they are inadequate.

Relying on standardized testing to determine how well a school is performing does not make sense for rural schools. The tests do not measure individual achievement, but rather compare grade-level scores each year. Therefore, because class sizes are so small, “Scores can fluctuate considerably based on even one child who is special needs, or gifted, or an English language learner, or who moves in or out of their district” (Challenges 3). Also, rural schools tend to have a lot of student mobility. “What do we do for students who are here for the testing but not for the learning?” (Challenges 3) The law holds educators accountable for factors over which they have no control. An

Illinois school system study supports this point. It finds that "...a minimum of 64% of the variance in the percentage of students that meet or exceed state standards is explained by variables that cannot be altered by teachers or local administrators" (Beck 8). Beck argues the government should not sanction schools based on these criteria.

The provisions in place for students attending schools that do not meet AYP do not support students in rural settings, either. NCLB strongly encourages school choice for allowing people to change to schools that are meeting state requirements. However, in rural settings, there are not any other schools nearby to which students can easily transfer. An "Alaskan study observes, 'In a state where districts are the size of states and villages are not accessible by roads, providing choice and supplemental providers proves a challenge'" (Challenges 10). In addition, the law calls for outside supplemental educational services for students, but in an isolated area, these resources are extremely limited (or nonexistent). Also due to isolation, if a school gets shut down, students may completely lose access to any education. The stakes under NCLB, then, seem much higher in rural areas, as students often depend solely on a school that may be the only one for miles. Otherwise, "...the only viable options may be home schools, charter schools, distance learning, vouchers, and public boarding schools" (Challenges 10). None of these alternatives offer the same kind of learning experience a school creates.

No Child Left Behind calls for certain teacher qualifications, as well. It says they must "...have state certification, hold a bachelor's degree, and have demonstrated subject area competency. All new hires in Title I programs after the start of the 2002-2003 school year must meet these requirements, while existing teachers have until the end of the 2005-2006 school year to do so" (Challenges 6). In rural schools, where there are

often very few teachers dealing with multiple grade levels, this is quite a challenge. Something the law doesn't acknowledge is that both hiring people with higher qualifications and bringing current employees up to meet the standard can be extremely expensive. "Almost all rural, small, or isolated schools report difficulty in hiring and retaining teachers because of low salary scales, little or no employment opportunities for a spouse, and lack of inservice programs" (Challenges 6). Small, struggling districts often can not afford to change this situation without financial assistance.

This begs the ever-looming question of what funding provisions the federal government makes to support NCLB mandates. There are some programs in place to offer assistance. Title I funding is available "...to school districts via one of several formulas based on the number of poor students" (Analysis 1). Also, the Rural Education Achievement Program is in place to help compensate for "financial barriers of geographic isolation" (Analysis 1). Some slightly less directly related programs are Impact Aid for districts with federal property financial impact, the Perkins Vocational Act to provide career and technical education, and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act to help meet special education students' needs (Analysis 1). Unfortunately, as more districts apply and qualify to receive aid from these programs, the package given to them will decrease so the overall budget remains the same. Many schools fail to meet certain requirements for funding, as well: "Rural school districts are placed at an additional disadvantage because they often do not have the staff availability in order to apply for competitive grants at the federal level" (Analysis 1). Often, the remaining options are for states to make up the gap, schools to struggle on their own, or consolidation efforts.

*Diversity of Needs*

There are a few levels of diversity that further complicate achieving the goal of offering a quality education to all students in rural schools: differences in the classroom, between schools, and between geographic areas. Dealing with diverse needs of students within the classroom can be extremely difficult. “Rural schools face challenges associated with factors other than poverty, including students with disabilities, students who cannot speak English well, and minority students disadvantaged by generations of racial and ethnic discrimination” (Johnson *v*). Whereas more populated areas have resources to deal with a wide variety of needs, public schools often lack access to programs and professionals they need.

Every school has a unique student population that has unique needs. Although it is impossible to note all of these differences, it is important to keep in mind that local input and information is key throughout the decision-making process for rural schools. There must be room for flexibility and creativity in addressing issues.

One way of shedding some light on the diversity of needs, though, comes through considering schools in different geographic regions. For example, “States with the lowest rural NAEP scores are located primarily in the Southwest, West, and Southeast” (Johnson *vi*). So, these regions generally need to analyze and improve testing.

Meanwhile, the Northeast does better on standardized exams, yet they must address inequality issues: “Four contiguous northeastern states are among the top states on both the Poverty Gap and the Challenges Gap....It appears that these states have adopted an urban large-school model in rural areas that is producing mediocrity....” (Who *vi*). Urban models do not work in the unique, rural school setting. “Although these are demographically ‘urban’ states, they are home to nearly 1.3 million students who

attend rural schools (nearly 15% of all rural students in the U.S.)” (Who *vi*). Dealing with rural schools differently than with urban ones poses a unique challenge for these states.

Gaps between different states’ graduation rates are significant, as well. “Less than 50% of South Carolina’s rural students graduate in four years, the lowest rate in the nation, and just over 90% of Nebraska’s graduate in four years, the highest rate in the nation” (Johnson *vi*). In many areas, there are vast differences in trends between states and districts. This calls for a multi-dimensional approach to problem solving.

### ***The Plan: Addressing Weaknesses, Emphasizing Strengths***

It is time to address the education of students attending rural public schools. The first key step is informing the public about the situation. From there, we must focus on resolving specific issues. Three major areas to consider are teacher recruitment and retention, funding for programs and facilities, and the role of the federal government. Guiding all reform must be the goal of providing the best possible education.

### **Learning in the Classroom: Teacher Recruitment and Retention**

In addition to encouraging rural students to pursue careers in education and return to their communities to teach, there are a number of ways to draw other teachers to rural settings and help them feel comfortable there. Harmon has some insight into this. Universities could help, for example, by encouraging students to visit and become more acquainted with rural schools. Similarly, it is important to “...raise the positive visibility of rural schools....Without the ability to compete with more wealthy districts who can ‘buy’ the best teachers, rural school systems will need to play to their strengths in attracting prospective teachers” (Harmon 7). In this sense, districts need to market themselves, publicizing rural schools’ positive attributes. “Today, use of the Internet

would certainly be a recruitment source” (Harmon 10). The Internet provides a useful venue for implementing this strategy. There could, for instance, be a website dedicated to providing information and news about rural schools across the country or region.

Once teachers decide to work in rural schools, it is important to help make the adjustment smooth. Before they begin work, the teacher should learn about the community and become integrated into it. Communities should support new teachers and understand this is an intense transition to make. Things like meeting with families in the area or even holding a special end of summer event for the purpose of getting to know the new teacher would help people get to know their new community member. Stone, Luft, and Lenke contribute ideas of how to help adjust once the work begins, as well. They suggest mentoring programs, teacher collaboration, and professional development/in-service to make the induction period a rewarding, supportive time (Harmon 11). Especially for inexperienced teachers, an on-line community of rural school educators could provide a social and work network that extends beyond the immediate physical surroundings. This may provide a different level of support.

### **Who Will Help? Federal Government in Relation to Funding and NCLB**

The idea that the federal government should provide more funding is not new. Looking at our history, “In 1975, Congress promised to pay 40 percent of the National Average per Pupil Expenditure for every child in special education. The president’s budget [for Fiscal Year 2007] reduces the federal commitment from 17.8 percent to just 17 percent....., thereby forcing districts to cover the \$15 billion federal shortfall” (Analysis 2). Many people believe the states should work directly with schools to ensure their success, leaving the federal government largely out of issues that are unique to each

district. Although this is important, many state budgets are already stretched thinly, and many rural districts lack adequate funding. The federal government should reassess its role and consider increasing the amount of money it dedicates to public education.

The common view that states are responsible for education relates to most aspects of meeting NCLB guidelines, too. People "...suggest rural districts work closely with their state education agencies to ensure proper AYP alternatives are developed for districts with small student populations" (Challenges 5). Similarly, "The AASA and NASBE point out that the best option for rural districts is to work with their state departments of education on determining the formalized assessment that will be used for their state" when it comes to paraprofessionals' qualifications (Challenges 9). This perspective is valid because every district is unique, and states certainly deserve to determine how to deal with issues. However, when states can not fund all of the necessary changes, we should not neglect these needs. Because NCLB sets such high standards, it should guarantee support for programs and facilities to meet these goals.

### ***Final Thoughts***

Any significant policy changes begin with public awareness and demand. If voters remain silent, elected officials feel no pressure to make changes, even if changes are long overdue. Currently, the lack of discourse about rural schools is leaving them under this society's radar, which means we are ignoring millions of children. Right now, "...the truth is that rural schools and communities are increasingly invisible in a mass society that is fundamentally preoccupied with its urban identity, its urban problems, and its urban future" (Johnson *vii*). This trend needs to change in order to ensure that all children have access to a quality education.

## Suggested Reading

Beck, Frank D., and Grant W. Shoffstall. "How Do Rural Schools Fare Under a High Stakes Testing Regime?" Journal of Research in Rural Education 20 (2005): 1-12. Bridge. 23 Oct. 2006 < <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/20-14.pdf> >.

This research group used analyses of data from Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) to see how rural schools perform and whether the program treats schools fairly. They conclude that rural schools do better on tests but the designation system benefits suburban schools. The information may be useful for those specifically interested in the (un)fairness of standardized testing.

"Challenges and Opportunities of NCLB for Small, Rural, and Isolated Schools." 2003. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. 23 Oct. 2006 < <http://www.nwrel.org/planning/reports/NCLB/NCLB.pdf> >.

Put together by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Office of Planning and Service Coordination, this report examines how small schools are reacting to NCLB and highlights some problems they are having meeting its mandates. It outlines specific issues and highlights a wide range of techniques various schools have used to deal with the new requirements.

ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). U.S. Department of Education. <<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal>>.

"ERIC provides free access to more than 1.2 million bibliographic records of journal articles and other education-related materials and, if available, includes links to full text. ERIC is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES)." It has a wide variety of articles and material related to education issues.

Harmon, Hobart L. "Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Areas." Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Dallas. 1-4 Mar. 2001. ERIC. 23 Oct. 2006. <[http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/26/5e/ef.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/26/5e/ef.pdf)>.

This is a paper presented by Hobart L. Harmon at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting and Exhibits in 2001. He compiled a plethora of information from a number of previous studies pertaining to teacher attraction/retention in rural schools. Even the lists of suggestions provided are insightful.

Johnson, Jerry, and Marty Strange. "Why Rural Matters 2005." The Rural School and Community Trust. 21 Oct. 2006 <<http://files.ruraledu.org/whyruralmatters/WRM2005.pdf> >.

This report gives an in-depth picture of the state of rural schools. It uses "22 statistical indicators grouped into four gauges measuring: (1) the relative *importance* of rural education, (2) the level of *poverty* in rural schools, (e) other socio-economic *challenges* faced by rural schools, and (4) the *policy outcomes* achieved in rural education" (v). There is useful information concerning specific regions and states.

Lyson, Thomas A. "What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York." Journal of Research in Rural Education 17 (2002): 131-137.

This study looks at schools in New York communities with populations of 500 or less and those with populations between 501 and 2500 to see if the presence of a school indicates a more lively community. It examines various indicators of quality of life/community such as housing, income and welfare, and occupational/employment characteristics. Lyson's results confirm that communities are stronger in areas with schools.

No Child Left Behind. U.S. Department of Education. 23 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>>.

This website, run by the U.S. government, provides a wide range of information about the "No Child Left Behind" legislation. It has information for parents, students, teachers, and administrators. There is also access to the NCLB text and reports on specific districts. The page has many links to related articles and websites, as well.

### **Other Works Cited**

"Analysis of the Department of Education's Budget Impact on Rural America."  
2006. National Education Association, The Rural School and Community Trust.

Lemke, June Canty. "Teacher Induction in Rural and Small School Districts." Rural Partnerships: Working Together. Proceedings of the Annual National Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES). Austin. 23-26 Mar. 1994.

Peshkin, A. Growing up American: Schooling and the survival of community. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.