

# Considerations for Preparing Educators for Rural States

*Hank Rubin*

## Preface

It goes without saying that urban education is somehow different from *other* education. Scores of big-city teacher education colleges target the preparation of urban educators. Whatever it is that distinguishes urban—its racial diversity, the pace of its economy and lifestyle, its multiculturalism, etc.—is presumed, also, to characterize *urban education*.

This article explores some of the characteristics that distinguish *rural* education with an eye to the development of principles, content and methods for the preparation of *rural educators* with, perhaps, at least as much clarity as guides the preparation of their urban counterparts.

## Background

Forty-three percent of the nation's public schools are in rural communities or small towns of fewer than 25,000 people. Thirty-one percent of the nation's children attend these schools while 21 percent of our children go to schools in yet smaller communities with populations below 2,500<sup>1</sup>. And poverty—which so often is construed as an urban dilemma—is a disproportionate concern with some 193 of the 200 most impoverished school districts in America classified as rural districts.

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<sup>1</sup> *Why Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education* (Elizabeth Beeson and Marty Strange: A Report of the Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program: February 2003).

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Most Americans find these demographics surprising. With one in three children attending decidedly non-urban schools, one would think that federal law, philanthropic resources and university research would be comparably split to support their unique instructional needs. But they are not:

- Educators in rural and small-town schools across America are just beginning to find the voice that will be needed to expand the political and regulatory discussion attendant to the federal No Child Left Behind Act; moving it beyond its singularly urban focus to address the unique complications and needs associated with education of children in rural and small-town schools.
- While there are many public and private schools and colleges of teacher education that target the development of *urban* educators, there are few (if any) that have intentionally targeted the preparation of education professionals with skills and dispositions especially suited to serve the instructional and developmental needs of rural and small-town students.

Teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers connected to preK–12 education in states with small rural districts know that public school teaching and administration in these districts is, *somehow*, qualitatively different than it is in their urban or suburban counterparts. It is important that we clarify these differences and address them in our preservice and inservice programs for the teachers, administrators and school counselors who work in these districts. The urgency of this work is driven home by the fact that the declining school-age population in small rural districts is one of the most rapid and devastating demographic trends impacting American public education<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> More than one out of every three rural schools in America lost at least 10% of their enrollment in the four years between 1996 and 2000 (Rural Trust), and this is a growing trend.

## **Economic Development + Education Development**

We can predict the demise of small rural communities: it happens when the last farm implements dealership loses its franchise and the public school closes its doors.

To win the race against the swelling exodus of families with school-age children leaving small-town rural communities and to hold on to youngsters who graduate and then move away to pursue their urban dreams, rural states will have to balance investment in job-creation with investment in K-12 educational development. The state that claims bragging rights to having the best rural and small-town schools in the nation will not only reverse the steady out-migration of young families from its small communities, it will also attract young couples who value small-town qualities to these communities to raise their children.

## **Educators as Leaders**

Teachers, school administrators and policy makers are deeply impacted by these demographic changes. Not only are their jobs on the line, but the integrity of their positions as education (and community) leaders calls on them to do more than suffer and chronicle these changes. It calls on them to influence the future of these declining rural communities.

As residents of these communities, educators share a civic responsibility to ensure the well-being of their neighbors and children. As principals, teachers and policy leaders, these educators exercise more influence than they often understand. If teachers, school administrators, and policymakers were to exercise this influence, what impact should they aim to have? And what should guide the decisions they make and the leadership they provide?

## **Developing a Vision**

Today there is no discernable shared vision that might guide the leaders of these rapidly changing small districts and communities. Arguments for sustaining small and shrinking communities all too often revolve

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around a nostalgic vision of lifestyles and communities straight out of Normal Rockwell paintings. They affirm deep emotional attachments to personal and collective rural memories, but such a backward-looking vision fails to meet the test of providing a compelling argument for *investing in a future*.

By unbundling this nostalgia, we can begin to identify unique characteristics and values in rural communities that contribute to a compelling future vision. Such elements may include family security, public safety, child/family-centered decision-making, strong work ethic, agricultural and ecological ethics, etc.

The first step towards building (or determining the viability of building) a compelling vision for the future of America's small and rapidly changing communities is a step that we as educators are particularly well-suited to lead: We can convene the right people to facilitate a productive discussion that is reflective, constructive, and forward-looking so that we can build a framework for discussing, shaping, resourcing, measuring, teaching, and sustaining rural communities that have clear value and compelling reasons to exist and thrive.

### **Education as an Agent of Change**

Most of us in small-town rural America are humble and, in our self-deprecation, may inadvertently contribute to the exodus of our young people in perhaps the most pernicious way. Educators, parents, and children in declining rural districts often approach education as the process of accumulating keys to unlocking the door of small-town imprisonment. When every course and every lesson is valued for its contribution to helping students escape; when the threat of "never getting out of here" is used to let students know what's in store for them if they don't do their homework; when "success" is somehow wrapped up in leaving our communities; then, as educators, we need to develop local reasons and outlets for students' success and not, in effect, link success with the ability to succeed far from home.

At a recent statewide gathering of business leaders convened by South Dakota's governor, the transformational power of progressive K-12

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instruction in the skills and dispositions of entrepreneurship was raised first by the business leaders and then reinforced by the educators. When teaching is viewed as a process of developing entrepreneurial tools and dispositions, then it is easy to constructively attach the lessons, resources and visions of education to building, reviving, creating, and otherwise contributing to economic and cultural vitality *right at home in students' and teachers' own rural communities*. We can predict that a larger percentage of these students will choose to stay or return to their home communities to invest their entrepreneurial energies in childhood visions of this nature.

*Teachers-as-leaders* is not a new concept; educators as agents of rural transformation is. Here is what schools and colleges of education can do as we prepare and in-service the teachers, counselors, and administrators who can be these agents:

1. View our students and graduates as community leaders
2. Develop a taxonomy of the value-added characteristics, skills, and dispositions that will be demanded of them as rural educators and leaders, and
3. Reform how we prepare teachers, how we teach, how we in-service, how we counsel, and how we prepare administrators to make this contribution.

We need to reflect both on what we prepare our educators to do and how we prepare them to do it in small struggling districts. Some issues we may find ourselves addressing include:

- the need to prepare teachers with second professions so that they can make sufficient money during vacations to be able to afford to live in small communities with low teacher salaries (while working with state policy leaders to augment local salaries to support and *incentivize* highly qualified teachers);
- struggling with the implications of NCLB with particular attention to the multiple certifications that it requires of multitasking rural teachers;

- deeply considering the priority that certification and teacher preparation place on *content skills* versus *pedagogy* for rural educators (e.g., NCLB puts a much higher priority on content mastery than on teaching/learning methods, but in many small and geographically isolated schools, the practical need may be for teachers who are *fluent* in many content areas and *deeply skilled* in learning methodology, instructional technology and facilitating students' inquiry. Arguably, practical conditions make teachers' highest priority the ability to help children use technology to communicate with—and learn from—content experts from other places in the world);
- examining whether or how pre-service and in-service instruction fosters the skills, tools, and dispositions that our education students need for preK–12 teaching, as well as the leadership skills to convey to their young students the entrepreneurship, creativity, inventiveness, and asset-based view of their rural home communities that will lead more of them to grow up with ambitions to stay, invest in, and grow these communities.

## Conclusion

Public schools are institutions that are uniquely integrated into the culture, economy, and future of their surrounding communities. Public schools cannot thrive in dying communities. Communities cannot grow where there is no investment in the value of schools, schooling, and teachers. Enlightened economic development views educational development as a tool for building human capital and growing human markets. Educators must be leaders in developing this essential partnership. Every teacher, teacher educator, and policy maker—affecting the full range from preKindergarten through doctoral studies—shares some responsibility for taking up this leadership.