

# Rural Schools: Issues and Opportunities

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November 2007/Amanda Morgan

## did you know??

- ✓ One fifth of all U.S. public school students go to rural schools.  
*Provasnik, 2007. Status of Education in Rural America. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.*
- ✓ Small schools have higher graduation rates, less violence, and better attendance.  
*Lawrence et al, 2002. Dollars & Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools. Cincinnati, Ohio, and Washington, DC: Knowledge Works Foundation and The Rural School and Community Trust.*
- ✓ Research suggests that in small schools, poverty is less of a barrier to achievement.  
*Strange, 2002. Small Schools: A Political Irony. Basic Education 46(5), 7–10.*
- ✓ Both rural strengths (family and community ties) and rural weaknesses (isolation and limited resources) have inspired exciting educational innovations.  
*See text and resource list for examples.*
- ✓ Advocates of “place-based education,” a largely rural movement, believe their hands-on, multidisciplinary approach can re-engage students, strengthen ties between schools and communities, and foster good citizenship—while improving student achievement.  
*Chawla & Escalante, 2007. Student Gains From Place-Based Education. Denver: Children, Youth and Environments Center for Research and Design, University of Colorado.*
- ✓ Rural educators have special professional development needs.  
*The Rural School and Community Trust, 2004. Beating the Odds: High Performing, Small High Schools in the Rural South.*
- ✓ Rural schools face special challenges meeting NCLB mandates.  
*Jimerson, 2004. The Devil Is in the Details: Rural-Sensitive Best Practices for Accountability Under No Child Left Behind. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.*
- ✓ Rural schools urgently need innovative ways to make the most of shrinking budgets and overcome the expense of operating on a smaller scale.  
*Hobbs, 2004. The Promise and the Power of Distance Learning in Rural Education. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.*
- ✓ Rural schools often receive passionate community support.  
*Barley & Beesley, 2007. Rural School Success: What Can We Learn? Journal of Research in Rural Education 22(1).*

When I started looking into this, I was afraid it might be too esoteric a topic to fill up a whole pub report. I was surprised to learn what a significant part of the educational landscape our rural schools still are, what exciting work is going on outside the cities, and how serious (and apparently successful) people are about making sure their innovative projects work in an NCLB world.

This report will describe some common strengths and weaknesses of rural<sup>1</sup> schools and the special school-community relationship that often exists (for better or worse) in small towns, look at some key success factors and effective approaches, and briefly explore the (so far largely rural) movement for place-based education.

## what rural schools have going for them

- more personal connections •
- fewer discipline problems •
- less absenteeism •
- safer environments •
- more community support •
- higher graduation rates •
- less bureaucracy •

A school system that stretches from Lubec, Maine, to Ni'ihau, Hawai'i, is diverse enough to provide exceptions to any rule. But there does seem to be a pattern to what's good about rural schools: lower student-teacher ratios, more personal connections between students and staff, fewer discipline problems, less absenteeism. More students participate in extracurricular activities. More students say they feel safe. Schools get more support from the community.

Rural schools are small, and more and more people are saying that small is good. Small schools have higher graduation rates, and more of those graduates go on to college. Researchers are finding a link between smaller schools and higher achievement.<sup>2</sup> Teachers have more job satisfaction and bureaucracy is less of a plague. As one principal in Maine put it, **"We're on the cutting edge because we never changed."**

## what's more difficult for rural schools

- poverty •
- isolation •
- fewer elective/AP classes •
- lower student expectations •
- teacher recruitment issues •
- professional development issues •

The poverty and isolation of the communities they serve have a profound effect on many rural schools. Because of fixed expenses, per-pupil cost is relatively high. A good library or gym or computer lab can be beyond reach. With little money, in sparsely populated areas, it can be almost impossible to comply with NCLB mandates like school choice and supplemental educational services.

Rural schools hold their own in core subjects, but are often unable to offer elective and advanced-placement classes. In communities where few parents have gone to college, it can be difficult to persuade students that they can aim high.

Recruiting teachers is a challenge for isolated districts that can't afford to pay competitive salaries. With smaller staffs, it can be difficult for

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<sup>1</sup> I wasn't able to sort out what exactly qualified as rural in whose eyes; two population numbers that cropped up a lot were under 25,000 and under 5,000.

<sup>2</sup> I'd be happy to provide reference info for this report on request.

teachers to get time off for professional development—and, because of the long distances, difficult to travel to it. Rural advocates also argue that teacher training is overly focused on urban and suburban models.

## teaching strategies that work

- collaboration •
- technology •
- flexibility •
- local ingenuity •
- distance learning •
- community relations •

Collaboration is a central theme in rural school success—whether teacher with teacher, teacher with parent, school with community, or school with universities, nonprofits, and other schools.

Effective use of technology is also critical, especially in distance learning, which is helping to fill in the gaps in elective and advanced class offerings. To work well, technology requires collaboration (neighboring schools pooling resources) and professional development (knowing what to buy and how to use it).

A school district in Alberta has a mobile lab that travels between schools. Mississippi offers scholarships to students who commit to working in critical teacher shortage areas. The success stories I read were all about local ingenuity rather than imported one-size-fits-all programs.

Distance learning has increased rural teachers' access to professional development. Some states also have intensive mentoring or master-teacher programs geared for rural teachers. Alaska mentors may be the most adventurous, snowmobiling to remote schools and being prepared to camp out in the gym.

Flexibility, lack of hierarchy, strong personal relationships, and good leadership are other common success factors. **“There is a joyful, friendly, positive feeling about these schools, and it inevitably starts at the top,”** one study noted. But perhaps the most important success factor is a school's relation to its community.

## schools and communities

- small schools and small towns  
need each other

School is often the social and economic heart of a small town: a gathering place, a symbol of shared identity, often one of the area's largest employers and customers. Teachers may be the most educated people in town. A Colorado resident told researchers, **“This place is the heartbeat of this community. If these doors shut and didn't open again . . . this town would just sort of wither away.”**

Support from the community can do a lot to overcome a school's limitations. In some places, that support is abundant; in others, it's yet to be earned. One of the most poignant stories I read was of a school in a First Nations community in northern Ontario where teachers complained that parents never responded to the invitations they sent

home with students—and didn't realize that many of the parents couldn't read English.<sup>1</sup>

Schools have hosted social and cultural events, opened the gym to the public after hours, and even started school clinics that end up serving the whole community. A principal in Missouri makes a point of asking less educated parents to volunteer at tasks that will make them feel included, not intimidated.

In the mid 1990s, a Canadian study called community relations the number one priority for school improvement. Small schools and small towns may just sink or swim together.

## place-based education

This might seem a little idealistic, but apparently, it works. It got its start in rural schools, because the community connection is stronger and simpler there, but I can't see why it wouldn't work elsewhere.

- multi-disciplinary •
- hands-on •
- community-oriented •
- "rooted in what is local" •

Place-based education draws on familiar approaches like environmental ed and service learning, but goes further. The goal is Projects are often multidisciplinary and nearly always hands-on.

**"learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, and economy of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning."**

Students in Alabama publish newspapers. Alaska schools have an elder-in-residence program. Business students in South Dakota led a "buy local" campaign that increased retail sales by more than a third and evolved into a thriving independent nonprofit. Students gain meaningful skills, from film and computer technology to culinary arts to community organizing.

This sounds like way too much fun for anyone to have and still make Adequate Yearly Progress. But people who do this are also serious about assessment and meeting standards, and a number of schools have seen a dramatic rise in test scores—and a decrease in absenteeism, dropout, and discipline problems.

I feel like I'm writing a commercial. There's gotta be a downside to this. Most of the articles I read were written by advocates of the approach, but very few of them seemed polemical. Not all of the articles that claimed improved test scores backed up those claims, but a respectable number did. It sounds pretty cool to me.

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<sup>1</sup> Ojibwe is still spoken in the region and written with a syllabary rather than an alphabet.

## resources

### websites

The Rural School and Community Trust ([www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org))

*a major nonprofit working on rural education*

McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning—[www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org))

*rural ed is part of its research agenda*

National Research Center on Rural Education Support ([www.nrcres.org](http://www.nrcres.org))

*funded by the U.S. Department of Education*

Alaska Native Knowledge Network ([www.ankn.uaf.edu](http://www.ankn.uaf.edu))

*a remarkable state initiative to incorporate native knowledge and pedagogy into the education process*

Alaska Statewide Mentor Project (<http://alaskamentorproject.org>)

*other states have cool programs, but Alaska has the best websites*

### articles

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Yaunches, A. (2007). Llano Grande rising: A Rural Trust return to a rural Texas sensation. *Rural Roots*, April 2007.

Chawla, L., & Escalante, M. (2007, September). *Student gains from place-based education*. Fact Sheet #2. Denver, CO: Children, Youth and Environments Center for Research and Design. Retrieved from [www.peecworks.org/PEEC/PEEC\\_Research/S02A66E10?Close=-1](http://www.peecworks.org/PEEC/PEEC_Research/S02A66E10?Close=-1) on November 18, 2007 (see also <http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/cye/>).

Loveland, E. (2005, February.) *Achieving academic goals through place-based learning: Students in five states show how to do it*. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.

### citations for quotes

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**This place is the heartbeat:** page 7 of Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007, January 10). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(1).

**There is a joyful:** page 30 of The Rural School and Community Trust (2004). *Beating the odds: High performing, small high schools in the rural south*. Washington DC: author.

**Learning that is rooted:** page 1 of The Rural School and Community Trust (2003). *Engaged institutions: Impacting the lives of vulnerable youth through place-based learning*. Washington DC: author.