Exploring Equity Issues: Special Edition

MAEC
Center *for* Education Equity

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Advancing Equity in Rural Schools & Communities

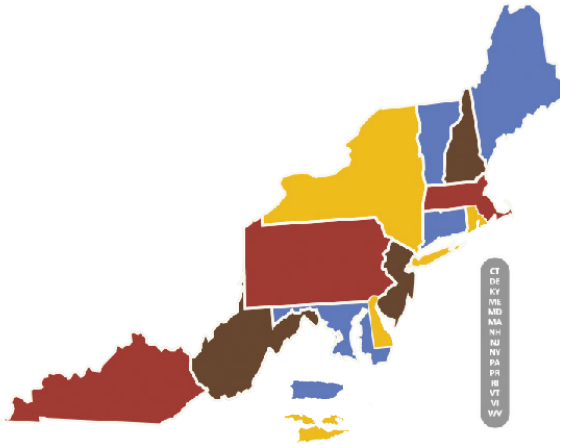


About MAEC

MAEC is an education non-profit dedicated to increasing access to a high-quality education for racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners. We work to promote excellence and equity in education to achieve social justice.

About CEE

MAEC established the Center for Education Equity (CEE) to address problems in public schools caused by segregation and inequities. As the Region I equity assistance center, CEE works to improve and sustain the systemic capacity of public education to increase outcomes for students regardless of race, gender, religion, and national origin. CEE is funded by the US Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



Authorship

This collection was edited by Heather Biggar Tomlinson, Ph.D., Senior Specialist for Early Childhood and Family Engagement at MAEC. Heather was spearheading CEE's 2020 Equity Institute focusing on rural issues when the pandemic hit. This series of articles was her brainchild and we greatly appreciate the contributions from all of the authors.

Disclaimer

MAEC is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this guide were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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Introduction

In January 2020, MAEC began planning its annual Equity Institute with a focus on advancing equity for rural schools and communities. Rurality, as it is not legally a protected class, is often left out of conversations about civil rights and equity. However, clear intersections connect rurality with poverty, racism, religious intolerance, gender-based discrimination, and nationality-based hostility. Rural communities experience obstacles to expanding opportunity and achievement due to lack of access to high-quality child care and K-12 educational opportunities, barriers to healthcare and mental health supports, and viable employment opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic forced MAEC and its Equity Institute partners, the Office for Civil Rights Philadelphia Office, West Virginia University, and McAndrews Law Office, to postpone the on-site event.

As the United States witnesses the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities--the deepened digital divide, lost jobs at the plants and factories economically anchoring rural communities, closed hospitals or unreachable health care services, greater food insecurity for children not receiving meals at schools--the need for rural conversation seems more important than ever. To continue the conversation, MAEC compiled a series of essays, articles, and research to tackle the question: how do we, as a society, value and support rural students and families? Thus this special edition of Exploring Equity Issues was born.

The rural community understands that the solutions needed in rural areas are inherently singular and will not likely come from transplanted metropolitan solutions. They will emerge through community innovation and local human talent and vision; and these solutions will only take root if they are supported by equity-based, systemic, and sustained national and state-level resources. This series seeks to paint a picture of a few of the many dimensions that characterize rural America. By exploring intersecting rural identities and challenges, we can see how the lived experiences and unique strengths of rural students enriches our educational system and our communities.

Rural Equity Series

MAEC

Gaining Ground on Equity for Rural Schools and Communities

Heather Biggar Tomlinson, Ph.D. September 2020

Mountainous Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the wide-open Great Plains, remote Alaska, lush Hawaii, and pastoral New England all evoke images of rural America, but they are unique regions with distinct differences in people, values, landscapes, and lifestyles. These and the many other pockets of rural America showcase diverse economic engines, natural resources, affluence or poverty levels, demographics, and cultures. Yet there are commonalities that transcend the distinctions to connect rural areas and create an overarching entity that collectively identifies as "rural America."

One in five Americans, or about 60 million people, lives in a rural area. Because 97% of the nation's landmass is considered rural, by definition these areas are sparsely populated and far from urban centers (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Although rural school districts are small—median enrollment is fewer than 500 students—the overall numbers are not: 28.5 % of schools are rural and 9.3 million students attend them (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019). The well-being and success of rural students is a critical determinant of the well-being and success of the nation as a whole.

Unfortunately, one of the commonalities connecting rural areas is a lack of access to services, infrastructure, and equitable policies and practices. This article provides an overview of how equity relates to rural America and its students and schools. While rural America has been overlooked and marginalized as a whole in many ways, there are layers of discrimination and disadvantage within that broader marginalization. Many of the inequities could be ameliorated by improved policies, approaches, and relationships between institutions that tackle inequities systemically. We examine the intersections of diversity and equity in rural communities and explain how these concepts dovetail, concentrating on five examples of inequity: resource allocation, physical and mental health services, support for the educator workforce, access to high-quality child care, and cultivating college readiness. The hope is that be better connecting the dots between equitable policies and stakeholders, and between love of place and the need for excellent educational opportunities, it's possible to see the potential of schools, communities and states to give all rural students a chance to flourish.

Diversity and Equity in Rural America

Diversity shows up in multiple dimensions. Students in rural areas may be racially diverse and linguistically diverse, diverse in gender and sexual identity, physical and intellectual ability, religious background, from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and family composition, and more. Students from non-dominant backgrounds may face layers of discrimination and disadvantage.

Racial Diversity

The narrative addressing rural communities has been oversimplified. The lack of nuance in the narratives can lead to false assumptions and prejudices. Although images in the popular press often present a narrow version of rural America, with a tendency to focus on poor, White communities, the nation's contemporary rural student body is richly diverse and multifaceted. The Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT) gives the U.S. a racial diversity index of 31.9, meaning that if someone randomly chose two students from a rural district, there would be an approximately one-third chance that those students would be of different races. However, the average belies a big range. According to the RSCT, in Maine, for example, racial diversity is low (10.7%), whereas in Delaware, the percentage is much more significant (56.8%). And within districts, the range is even greater. For example, in Pocantico Hills, New York, there is a diversity index of 67.7 (that is, a two-thirds chance that two students in a school would be of different races), whereas in 172 other districts, there is no racial diversity—meaning a school's student population might be entirely White, Hispanic, Black or Tribal. Overall, however, there is extraordinary diversity within rural America as a whole, and within some districts, specifically. Indeed, the three most diverse school districts in the nation are rural (Showalter et al., 2019).

Poverty

There are other kinds of diversity as well, including socioeconomic; affluence exists but the pervasive and persistent poverty has plagued some rural regions for generations. Overall, 15.4% of rural school-aged children in the United States live in poverty (Showalter et al., 2019). Some states, particularly in New England, have low rates of rural child poverty (e.g., Massachusetts, 3.5%) and some rural areas are amenity rich with abundant natural resources that bring in agricultural, recreational, and tourism benefits. Other states with large rural populations have distressing child poverty rates. For example, in the South, Mississippi's rate is 23.1% and Louisiana's is 22.9%. In Appalachia, Kentucky's rural child poverty rate is 21.6%. In the Southwest, 23.3% of rural children in Arizona and 29.7% in New Mexico live in poverty. In these areas, families have a median income of $30,000 (versus $54,000 nationally); working-age men have disabilities at more than twice the rate than in other areas, reaching almost one-quarter of the population; about four in ten children live in poverty; and one in five adults do not complete high school (Florida, 2018). More than eight out of ten of the nation's persistently poor counties are rural (Schull, 2019). For these areas, poverty can be a legacy that is difficult to overcome.

"Layers within Layers of Discrimination"

Within the broad layer of inequities that rural residents often face—less access to high-quality child care, schools, health care, mental health supports, employment opportunities,

professional development supports, transportation infrastructure, cultural amenities, and so forth—are deeper layers of prejudice and discrimination that disproportionately affect students living in poverty, people of color and other marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA+ families, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, families from underrepresented religious backgrounds, newcomers, migrant families, and English Learners. Rural scholars often refer to the "layers within layers of discrimination" in rural communities (Erin McHenry-Sorber, personal communication, 2020).

MAEC's vision is that all children, regardless of race, gender, religion, national origin (English Learners), home language, or socioeconomic status, have the right to learn and achieve at high levels. While rural residents are not protected as a class by federal civil rights law, many factors that intersect with rural settings exacerbate discrimination and harassment. Rural communities have children of all races and religions. Their families come from myriad countries and speak as many languages. They have diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. They experience varying levels of affluence, poverty, and educational levels. All of these factors produce the potential for bias and marginalization. These layers within and across rural communities represent the rich diversity of rural America, but they also present platforms for ongoing inequity and the necessity for effective and equitable policies and practices.

Equity is not the same as equality. Unfortunately, many educational goals are driven by equality, where goods or services are distributed without consideration for varied student strengths and needs rooted in widely differing starting places. Equity is driven by student strengths and needs, providing what each person needs in order to thrive. This means that some schools and students would be well served by receiving more than others, depending on unmet needs, with the goal that all rural students have comparable access to excellent educational opportunities. While this idea is easily understood, it is difficult to implement because it requires that administrators distribute resources differentially. Frequently, what rural Americans have failed to receive through equitable policies and practices they have substituted with ingenuity, resourcefulness, and a deep sense of community and commitment. However, in order to sustain these practices, institutional policies must support and enhance individual creativity and grit.

Challenges for Rural Educators and Students

Schools provide more than education in all types of communities, and in rural areas, they are particularly important for the well-being of students and communities. They often represent the heart of community life. They provide avenues for dissemination of critical health, food, housing, counseling, employment, and other resources. They link families to essential services. Schools serve as social, health, and cultural centers as well, hosting family and sporting events, job fairs, health and wellness clinics and, in this era, COVID testing sites. As a result, rural educators and administrators feel pressure to do more and be more than is expected in other school communities (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020). At the same time, the equity-based challenges remain, including the distribution of money and other resources, access to health services, support for educators, access to

child care, and opportunities to develop college readiness.

Resource Allocation

Resources come in many forms. Resources that are critical to rural schools include funding and digital connectivity.

Funding

Adequate funding is a necessary foundation without which schools cannot thrive. Pre-COVID-19, rural school districts received on average 16.9% of state education funds, in spite of the fact that 28.5% of schools are designated as rural; data show that 15.4% of students attend schools in rural districts, but some rural schools are located in districts not designated as rural (U.S. Department of Education, 2014-2015). In spite of these disparities, serving rural students can also include additional costs such as steep transportation expenses that shift money away from instruction and student learning resources. On average, rural school districts spend $1.00 on transportation for every $10.81 spent on instruction, and in some instances the ratio is worse, such as West Virginia ($6.48) and New Mexico ($6.17) (Showalter et al., 2019).

Districts that serve large numbers of low-income students and students of color on average receive $1,800 less per student than districts serving few students of color (Darling-Hammond, Schachner, & Edgerton, 2020). COVID-19 greatly exacerbates the problem. Consequently, administrators in low-income and racially diverse schools can expect significant economic stress in the coming years. Declining enrollment rates were already forcing district leaders to make painful decisions about school consolidation. Facing challenges with data reporting given sample sizes will also add heavier financial burdens to the resource stress. In response, education leaders are calling for the adoption of more equitable state school funding formulas that are weighted for poverty, English proficiency, foster care or homeless status, and special education status. As highlighted by the Learning Policy Institute, “In large states, this might be further adjusted for geographic cost differentials, while also taking into account the transportation and other needs of sparse, rural districts” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020, p. 103).

To save money and reduce the costs of facilities, teachers and administrators, food services, and other resources, many districts rely on consolidating schools in order to preserve capital. However, there are equity issues with consolidation. School districts with large populations of students of color and children living in poverty tend to do better academically in smaller schools, whereas school consolidation tends to widen achievement gaps. Over one-quarter of rural students spend more than one hour each way getting to and from school, and 85% spend at least 30 minutes each way commuting (Lavalley, 2018). Longer bus rides and longer days mean rural students have less time than others to spend on homework, extracurricular activities, participation in academic support programs, sleep, and family and community activities. These greater distances may also prohibit families and community members from attending on-site activities at school, which can affect optimal family and community engagement in education. Ironically, longer commutes increase costs for districts, decreasing the financial benefits of consolidation.

Broadband and Connectivity

COVID-19 shines a spotlight on continuous and new layers of inequities, not least of which is the long-standing concern for rural communities about internet connectivity. Access to devices and broadband is essential as education, health care, and other services pivot to virtual platforms. Although this reliance on digital and online learning is challenging for everyone, rural communities are disproportionately affected. In 2017, there were over 23 million Americans without reliable Internet and 68% of them lived in rural areas (Lavalley, 2018). During the school closures in Spring 2020, rural school districts were much less likely than urban districts to provide students with hotspots or devices, such as tablets, and 31% of rural parents reported needing public Wifi for students to do homework, more than non-rural counterparts (Opalka, Gable, Nicola, & Ash, 2020; Vogels, Perrin, Rainie, & Anderson, 2020). Rural teachers were far less likely than urban teachers, with a 25-point gap, to be required to continue to monitor student progress, and only 25% expected to continue to provide instruction, as compared to over half of urban teachers (Gross & Opalka, 2020). This gap may be due to the challenges for rural teachers to work from home where they too lack connectivity. Even when students and teachers have access to devices, high-speed internet is often not available across large tracts of countryside, making streaming and other educational services difficult or impossible to access.

Physical and Mental Health Services

Inequitable access to, and quality of, health care services is a hardship for many rural communities. Even before COVID-19, rural communities' access to quality health care was inadequate for dealing with higher than average rates of heart disease, cancer, stroke, opioid overdose, respiratory disease, injuries, and other problems. Rural children with mental health issues or behavioral and developmental disorders face greater community and family challenges than other children (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges to provide health care to patients with COVID-19 in rural communities: fewer hospital beds, less equipment, and fewer health care workers. The virus has been equally pernicious, impairing mental health, as the fallout of job losses, isolation, anxiety, depression, grief from losing loved ones, and missed educational opportunities surges through rural communities. Clinicians report that rising rates of family stress are likely increasing the rates of domestic violence and substance abuse, while services to address these concerns remain difficult to access (Abramson, 2020). Significantly, health care professionals, child care providers, mail delivery personnel, agricultural workers, and other essential workers living in rural communities face the same toxic stressors as others, while simultaneously experiencing the stress of high rates of exposure to the virus. They may face terrible choices between preserving their livelihoods and risking their lives. These are equity issues that could be ameliorated by increased investments in infrastructure and training to provide more hospitals, mental health services, health care professionals, and transportation services needed to access them.

Supporting the Educator Workforce

Many rural school districts struggle to maintain a highly qualified workforce, and district leaders have trouble recruiting and retaining teachers. The United States has seen teacher shortages in recent years. While the number of teachers has increased in the last few

years, the nation still has 40,000 fewer public school teachers than it did prior to the 2008 recession, in large part because of school budget cuts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Rural communities have been hit harder than others with the combination of budget issues and concomitant teacher shortages. The teacher strikes that swept the nation in 2018 and 2019 reflected decreases in teacher wages, among other deprioritizing of education. This engendered deep frustration, particularly in historically poor and isolated rural school districts.

Erin McHenry-Sorber, professor at the University of West Virginia, highlighted the effects of teacher shortages and general devaluation of the teaching profession in rural communities. She described the intersection this way:

> ...Rural communities across the state, particularly those once dependent on industries such as coal, have experienced a protracted state of economic depression and increased poverty and opioid addiction -- a consequence of Americans' willingness to accept West Virginia as one of the nation's economic sacrifice zones...
>
> In the midst of economic stagnation and diminished workers' rights, these rural West Virginians find themselves marginalized economically and socially, pushing back against normalized epithets of "hillbillies" and "rednecks," at the same time they're fighting for their economic survival (McHenry-Sorber, 2018).

The economics of devaluing the education profession hits all household budgets hard—women teachers earn 15.6% less than similarly educated women in other professions and, for men, the wage gap jumps to 26.8% (Wolf, 2019)—but in rural communities, the problem is worse. Rural school districts are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to compensating teachers. According to the Rural School and Community Trust, rural educators earn $69,797 compared to $74,153 for suburban educators (Showalter et al., 2019). Teachers may also be unwilling to move to areas with limited social and cultural opportunities and the low salaries that many rural school districts offer are not much of an enticement.

Although salary and benefits are critical, researchers also cite administrative support as important determinants of rural teachers' employment decisions. The role of principals matters in how they provide mentorship, create trusting relationships, are positive and collaborative, establish an open work culture with strong communication, and support teaching preparation and professional development opportunities (Tran & Dou, 2019). Rural principals, however, are paid less than other principals and experience the same challenges as their teachers, while holding greater responsibilities. Rural educators lack access to professional development and may struggle to find ways to collaborate with peers. Specialized teachers, such as those focusing on special education, art, and music, often serve multiple schools and must make long drives, isolating them professionally. There are frequently fewer resources to support culturally and linguistically responsive approaches, including interpreters and language and literacy programs for adults. At times, there are few community partners to support housing and food services, health care, substance abuse programs, parenting education, adult cultural activities, and other

necessary and enriching activities. These challenges for the workforce, and inability to address community-wide issues, affect classroom quality and student experiences and outcomes.

Access to High-Quality Child Care

More than 1.1 million families with young children live in rural areas (Paschall, Halle, & Maxwell, 2020). America's mixed-delivery approach to early care and education takes a toll on rural families because of the gaps in service provision, the range of quality of programs, and the resulting differences in school readiness outcomes. Child care deserts are areas in which there are three infants or children for each spot available within a reasonable distance. There are simply more programs available in metropolitan areas: compared to rural areas, high-density urban areas offer 2.85 times the number of centers, 3.20 times the number of listed home-based providers, and 6.87 times the number of unlisted paid home-based providers (Paschall et al., 2020). The younger the child, the more difficult it is for parents to find out-of-home care, an issue that is again more challenging in rural areas. Over half (55%) of rural Americans live in a child care desert, a percentage that is certain to increase in the wake of COVID-19 child care closures. Child care programs run on thin financial margins, and home-based providers typically have the least room for financial disruption. Widespread closures of home-based programs will make stability and recovery in the wake of the pandemic especially hard for rural communities.

Rural working mothers rely disproportionately on home-based care—serving 22 percent of rural preschoolers versus 10 percent of metropolitan preschoolers (Schochet, 2019). Family child care programs—with the great majority unlisted—play an outsized role in rural child care options; unlisted programs may not meet licensing or accreditation standards that assure health and safety, curricular and other benchmarks (Paschall et al., 2020; Shochet, 2019). In short, family child care programs are often well suited for rural communities—they may be offered by a known community member, closer to the home, and more affordable—but they may also be of lower quality.

For many rural families, accessing employment and child care simultaneously is a "chicken and egg" problem that is difficult to solve. As compared to women living in other localities, women in rural areas tend to have low-paying jobs, work part-time, and work long and non-standard hours (Paschall et al., 2020), making it difficult to find child care that fits both a family's working hours and budget. In addition, rural families typically pay a higher percentage of their income toward child care (12.2%) than do urban families (10.8%)—for comparison, the federal government recommends that child care should not account for more than 7 percent of a household budget (Schochet, 2019).

Not having access to high-quality early childhood education, whether because of availability, quality or affordability, interferes with children's readiness for kindergarten. This lack of access can determine the trajectory of rural children's educational journey. For rural students experiencing poverty, this puts them at an even greater disadvantage. A nationally representative study of over 6,000 students found that disadvantaged home environments, coupled with lack of access to high-quality child care, left rural children behind in terms of academic achievement (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013). Recent analyses

echo this finding. On average, on standardized test scores, rural students living in poverty score below their rural classmates who do not live in poverty. However, this gap is large in some states, such as Maryland, and narrow in others, such as Pennsylvania. These inequities highlight the need for policies and practices to ensure that the highest need students receive the most support in order to thrive (Showalter et al., 2019).

Cultivating College Readiness

School structures, processes, and cultures affect student dispositions and their opportunities to learn. Students from rural communities have challenges obtaining support to effectively prepare for success after high school. They may have less access to highly competent PK-12 teachers, high-speed broadband, college guidance counselors, college interest and recruitment of rural students, or career and vocational education opportunities. Rural students graduate from high school at relatively high rates, 88.7% nationally (although some areas have considerably lower rates of high school graduation, particularly in rural Alaska, which has a 72.3% graduation rate). They may participate in dual high school/college courses, Advanced Placement exams, or commonly used college admissions tests such as the ACT and SAT (see Showalter et al., 2019, for details).

In spite of high school graduation rates, compared to their non-rural peers, rural graduates have lower rates of college enrollment and college graduation. Part of the discrepancy may stem from lower expectations from teachers or high teacher turnover that diminishes instructional quality. As one writer noted, "Students know they're falling behind. 'When I get to college, I've got to take college math,' Cierra said. 'But how am I supposed to do that if I don't know basics?'" (Hanford, 2018). A study of African American rural students in the southeastern U.S. found that students lacked access to rigorous courses, had little time with guidance counselors advising them on good-fit colleges, and were concerned about being out of place on campuses lacking diversity (Morales, 2016).

A systemic equity-based response to this issue would be to ensure rural high schools have the resources they need to dismantle barriers to successful college enrollment and college graduation. For example, college counselors in high schools are associated with a 10% increase in college enrollment (Quintero & Gu, 2019). High-speed broadband access is critical to college readiness as test preparation courses, dual credit courses, and other learning opportunities have become available online. Rural students, with their lack of broadband access, miss the opportunity to engage with them. In the face of almost universal school closures, broadband access has leapt to the top of the policy priority list to support educational opportunities, including opportunities for college readiness. If this issue is not addressed quickly, not only will children in the earliest years of their educational journey get off to a less than optimal start but also high schoolers will fall behind as schooling moves almost completely to virtual learning in the COVID-19 era.

Connecting the Dots

To achieve meaningful, sustainable equity-based policies and practices, stakeholders need to connect the dots so that all voices are heard, place-based strengths are

emphasized, and positive relationships take root or grow stronger. A mantra of some educators is that no meaningful learning takes place outside of meaningful relationships. The degree of progress and success rural children are likely to experience is grounded in their experiences with healthy families, schools, and communities that come together through relationships (and policies) that support their well-being in ways that both undergird and transcend academics. Relationships among committed adults and institutions enable communities to care for students as whole people. Relationships lead to support for students' basic needs—secure housing, fresh and affordable food, health care, supportive parenting, income stability, addiction- and abuse-free homes, mental health, freedom from fears of family separation or deportation, language access—factors that are inextricably linked to students' ability to learn and achieve.

In areas where rural students are achieving well, it's likely there are equitable policies, structures, and priorities. Students are able to make and maintain positive relationships. Appropriate and fair funding and resources, positive working conditions and fair wages for educators, high-speed broadband access, and investments in kindergarten and college readiness for all rural students are examples of equity operationalized through policies and practices. These equitable approaches are built on three salient dimensions: 1) Removing the predictability of academic success or failure based on social, economic, regional, or cultural factors; 2) interrupting inequitable practices, eliminating biases and oppression and creating inclusive school environments for adults and children; and 3) discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents, and interests that each human being possesses. This equitable and asset-based approach will expand opportunities for rural children to grow and succeed, and will harvest benefits for rural communities, the nation, the economy, and future generations.

Residents in rural communities support each other, and they often have a deep affection for their home towns and neighbors. We see this through advocacy and the collective organizing of creative, generous, and spirited activities that lift up rural community members—witness teacher strikes to improve working conditions for educators, annual local festivals, effective school and athletic fundraisers, and the recent anti-racism rallies. Rural communities thrive when their unique voices, contexts, and circumstances are viewed as a source of expertise, and connection to place can be at the center of any transformation of schools. To connect the dots creatively and beneficially does not mean "improving" aspects of rural living that arguably enhance family, student, and educational experiences. Rather it means creatively leveraging communities' strengths and advantages to deepen connections to both place and educational success—and providing resources equitably to make that possible.

Appalachian author Robert Gipe started the "Higher Ground Project" in Kentucky that enables community and technical college students to braid scholarly studies of the region with personal art and writings that express their experiences in rural America, "on topics ranging from drug abuse to the challenges of remaining and working in a job-challenged area, to local history of Black coal miners and their families. In other words, town and gown are connected" (Branscombe, 2020). Indeed, connecting students to the assets within reach in their communities and expanding the reach so that dynamic, meaningful educational opportunities exist for every rural student—connecting town and gown, connecting place and educational success—is our path to higher ground.

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Rural Equity Series

MAEC

Student's Perspective: Is There Room for Us at the Table? Being a College Student in Appalachia

Cassie Conklin

September 2020



As a daughter of Appalachia, a rural student, and a journalist, I've spent a lifetime aware of the inequities that those of us in Western Maryland experience. Indeed, while living in one of the richest states in the country, we are often left behind (U.S. News & World Report, 2019). Allegany County, where I live and raise a family, is the only county that does not have a state-funded COVID-19 testing center. My county, the poorest in Maryland, struggles to fund emergency services and depends heavily on volunteer departments. We are under-represented in our state capitol in Annapolis, and those who represent us seem to be more interested in fighting for fracking and energy extraction than in addressing growing food insecurity and the opioid epidemic. We have one major university and two community colleges in our region.

Despite the few number of institutions of higher education, our community celebrates these campuses, relishing in them as community building centers of culture. At my university, locals attend nearly every live performance that the Department of Theatre and Dance can attract. When guest lecturers visit, they enjoy full crowds of eager intellectuals. Our Division II sports teams look into the crowd to see full bleachers and stadium seats. Allegany and Garrett Colleges are equally beloved and offer quality forestry, dental hygienist, and massage therapy programs. Whatever stereotype you've heard about rural folks rejecting education isn't one that lives here. However, our students face unique inequities that never seem to make it to the headlines.

Feeling the "Otherness" and Distance

More students that attend my university are from Allegany County than any other county. This is not by accident. Local students often report feelings of anxiety and "otherness" when they consider attending large, urban campuses further downstate. For a population that isn't served by reliable public transportation, deciphering a bus map can be alienating. Moreover, the cost of a four-year institution is insurmountable for some, especially for first-generation college students.

Also, while academic ability is equally distributed throughout our state, opportunity is not. For me, growing up in this area, I had only one classmate attend the flagship University of Maryland at College Park and he enrolled because he received an athletic scholarship. My partner, an Appalachian transplant who grew up in Germantown, Maryland, says that UMD was the "default" school for his classmates. Do not be fooled into thinking this is mere proxemics at work, however. Rural high school students aren't recruited by urban campuses, by and large. Traveling down I-68 isn't cost-effective for recruiters, and with fewer students to meet overall, the equation never seems to balance.

Most of us don't have any regrets about staying close enough to home to enjoy Sunday dinners with our families. But we can't help but wonder…what if? What if I had known about the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at College Park where over 12 languages are taught at the undergraduate level, whereas my university doesn't even employ a full-time Spanish professor? What could I have become if I had been aware of the opportunities available to me?

Student Involvement in Decision-Making

One of the misconceptions about higher education is that there is an ongoing turmoil of ideas and philosophy, that students and faculty alike share in this struggle as they reach ever closer to enlightenment. Higher ed as I know it is the ceaseless turmoil in pursuit of funding, increased retention rates, and recruitment. As such, top-down leadership dominates our campus. The student government, though a sterling bunch, fights for a seat at the table but often learns of campus decisions in the local newspaper long after they've been decided.

While transparency and student engagement in decision-making was always lacking at my university, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue. One example of this was the planned reopening of campus in fall 2020. With two months' notice, and without soliciting a single student opinion, our campus president announced that the semester start would be moved up by two weeks from August 31 to August 17. For low-income students, this spelled disaster. How would they afford a semester at school without the two weeks of income they needed to save from their summer jobs? To add insult to injury, it was announced that 75% of classes would have an in-person component. For students with children who are attending public school virtually for the foreseeable future, the decision was met with frustration and anger. Despite calls for the administration to seek

student input moving forward, just last week a COVID-19 virtual coffee hour with the president was announced with only a day's notice. Even those with an earnest interest in staying informed and participating in the decision-making process are disenfranchised.

I do not doubt that a lack of transparency is an issue experienced elsewhere. Without another university to compete for students in the region, my school and other rural colleges seem emboldened to eschew traditional higher ed norms of inclusivity and consensus. Students are already a vulnerable population. By not including us in decision-making, especially amid a pandemic, the message we are receiving from our administration is: "We need your money; we don't need your consent."

Such exclusivity exacerbates our feelings of disenfranchisement. From the community and family engagement perspective, leaving students, especially non-traditional students, out of decision-making processes reminds us that our perspective matters less than others'. Without asking for our input, faculty and state administrators make decisions on our behalf that affect our ability to care for our families and to improve our educational and economic opportunities.

What It Means to Be a Non-Traditional Student at a Rural College

Approximately 1 in 6 students at my school is considered "non-traditional." This category includes students over 25-years old, veterans, and working parents who are enrolled either full- or part-time. Recognizing that these students are traditionally underserved, a newly formed non-traditional student organization conducted a campus-wide survey in March 2020, in order to better understand the gaps. Of the 47 responses, these were recurring themes:

Non-traditional students need a quiet area to relax and study in between classes as these students don't have dorm rooms to retreat to. One student wrote, "Having this space would make me feel connected to campus because I wouldn't feel out of place. I would know there is a specific area for students like me that I would be able to interact and connect with."

- Greater flexibility in scheduling would be helpful for working parents who struggle to attend classes during the normal workday. Not addressing this issue has resulted in students finding it difficult to finish their degree on time and has decreased overall retention rates.
- Students have requested assistance with connecting to internship programs that admit students over the age of 25. One student wrote, "Every internship I've looked at I've been too old for."
- Meal and drink options that are less expensive is an identified need. Several students remarked that Starbucks is cost-prohibitive; just having access to a coffee pot would be an improvement.

While all of these factors impact non-traditional students, the most pressing need is for child care.

Missing Out on Child Care, Health Care, Library Services and More

The university once had a University Children's Center which provided high-quality, low-cost care for the children of university students, staff, and faculty. Years ago, due to increases in insurance premiums, the center was closed and subsequently demolished. Child care has not been offered on campus since.



In our rural setting, child care is relegated mostly to daycare centers operated out of an individual's home. While these caregivers, mostly middle-aged to older women, are loving and kind to our kids, they offer limited educational programming and can be expensive. Often local community college and university students are forced to rely on elderly family members or neighbors to care for their children while they take courses. Worse yet, some parents have to take their children with them to class. Lucky for me, when I couldn't find child care during a required class in fall 2019, my professor welcomed my nine year-old daughter to sit in with us every Monday and Wednesday for 15 weeks. What if my professor had turned down my plea? The course I needed to take is only offered in the fall, every other year and my graduation would have been significantly delayed. Had it been a lab course, taking my little sidekick along wouldn't have been an option.

Ultimately, there are more rural equity issues than could possibly fit on these pages. For one, my university student body is diverse, with 48% of students being of a minority demographic, nearly 30% of which are Black students. Meanwhile, our faculty and staff is over 90% White and the university and local police forces are almost entirely White. Rural students in our state do not enjoy the benefits of the labs and libraries that our metro counterparts do, although the university is a member institution of the University System of Maryland. Our students do not have access to adequate health services either, as low-cost clinics do not put up shop in Allegany and Garrett counties. Indeed, these imbalances are just the tip of the iceberg.

We are living through the most difficult time in recent human history: a pandemic, visceral political division, rampant racial inequality, climate change, and the list goes on. As we search for the solutions to these challenges, we'd be well-served to address rural issues. Indeed, the coalition for equity needs every voice to be represented and my Appalachian neighbors and I have a lot to say.

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Rural Equity Series

Reimagining the "New Normal:" Equity, Policy, COVID, and Rural Public Schools

Arnold F. Fege

September 2020

We can all agree that before COVID-19, not all school districts and not all communities had the same educational opportunities and resources. And we can all agree COVID-19 has exposed in a dramatic fashion the inequities and gaps that were often ignored and neglected for many years, for many children and for many school districts. Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups such as students experiencing homelessness and students in foster care, were less likely to have rigorous, engaging, and positive educational experiences before the pandemic. Now there is a real risk that school closures, distance learning, hybrid models, and schools opening and closing will fall heavily on these populations and on another: those in rural school districts (Economic Research Service, 2020).

Much has been written about the challenges of larger, urban school districts. Indeed, in the past, my own organization has concentrated our policy and legislative focus on mostly urban and large county school systems. Rob Mahaffy, my colleague and the executive director of the Rural School and Community Trust, and longtime friends at Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE), were instrumental in assuring that rural, tribal, Alaskan Natives, and territories voices and needs be a seamless part of our organization's agenda as well. The goal is the same: to assure that all children have access to and receive a high-quality public education no matter where they reside. And at the core of that mission is **equity**.

So here we are in the midst of a global pandemic. All school districts should be planning now for how to make up this lost learning time, which particularly affects our most vulnerable students (King & Weingarten, 2020). Ideas include implementing summer programs, and extending or restructuring school days for the 2020-21 school year, summer of 2021, and school year 2022. During this period, federal, state, and local policymakers will be making difficult decisions and deciding how to make those choices

fair and equitable. Rural school districts have often been on the short end of these tradeoffs.

Many of the challenges that rural districts face are similar to mid-size and urban school districts. But there are also dynamics that work differently: size, scope, resources, community, political environment, staffing, geography, distance, isolation, workforce development, economics, and constrained tax base, to name a few. The point is not to undervalue the seriousness of the problems that urban education leaders face, but to recognize that rural districts face distinctive problems that have not received enough attention in terms of research, safety, resources, teacher and educator preparation, and certainly equitable policies and adequacy of funding.

Rural looks different across the country, from remote Native American lands in the West, to small towns in the Great Plains and Midwest, to the Mississippi Delta and Southern "Black Belt," to Appalachia and New England. Rural looks different even within each state: it might be a town of a few thousand people, or tiny communities several hours or even days from the nearest city, as in parts of Alaska. These differences require policies that recognize that one size does not fit all. In far too many cases, rural districts still do not have the resources and opportunities they deserve compared to urban school districts, although there remain differences within rural areas and they are also hard to define as a unified idea.

In total, 46 million Americans live in rural areas. About 53% of our nation's school districts and one-third of U.S. schools are in rural areas. Nearly 7.5 million public school students were enrolled in rural school districts during the 2016-17 school year—that's nearly one of every seven students across the country. The number is even larger when counting students who attend rural schools within districts classified as "non-rural." By this measure, more than 9.3 million students attend a rural school (Ratcliffe et. al, 2016). This means that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined. Nearly one in six rural students lives below the poverty line, one in seven qualifies for special education, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months (Showalter et. al, 2019).

To be clear, rural America offers assets often not available in urban settings. Rural residents feel that their community has a sense of shared values that are different from people in big cities: three quarters (74%) say other people in rural communities have similar values to their own, while two-thirds (65%) say people who live in big cities hold different values (Palosky & Singh, 2017). They also believe that their communities look out for one another and are good places to raise their children, and 76% of rural participants reported that their children's schools are high quality. America's rural communities and educators are a treasure and add to the rich diversity of this country.

For people living in rural America, schools are more than places of academic instruction. They provide food and health care for students, foster the sense of real community education, provide much-needed support for families, and act as central players in community life, with schools sometimes providing the only place for community

gatherings. However, even though many rural superintendents have found success in working collaboratively and with cooperatives, they face many obstacles, such as internet connectivity, post-secondary outcomes, and transportation funding. They struggle to recruit and retain teachers with specialized skills such as special education and TESOL. They need funding for support services such as child care, nurses, counselors, librarians and mental health workers. And finally, they need to figure out how to pay for rebuilding and renovating schools (Nicola et. al, 2020). And to make matters worse, the National Council of State Legislators predicts that because of COVID-19, states may face greater revenue shortfalls than during the Great Recession (National Conference of State Legislators, 2020). As rural districts spend time and resources on costly short-term strategies, either in person or virtually, they also worry about sustainability; as they fight for greater equity, the resources may not be there to support them in the future. Such lack of resources means rural students are more likely to have lower educational attainment, restricted student opportunity, and fewer support services (National Conference of State Legislators, 2020).

On the other hand, this is a moment in time—a short moment of time before the comforting chorus of "getting back to the old normal" gets too loud and powerful. If we can set clear expectations for our students, we can do the same for policy makers and our politicians at the state and federal levels. They need to spend time in rural school districts to better understand the issues before they make policies or pass laws. The current state and federal policies, laws, funding formulas and regulations that created the baked-in inequities need to be rooted out and replaced with policies that maintain the fundamental rights to a public education guaranteed to all children. It is possible to do this work while recognizing the distinct differences and characteristics between and among rural school districts.

The pandemic not only presents additional challenges for our rural schools, but also opportunities, very few of which are new, but most have historically resisted implementation. One thing is for certain: the world as we have known it will be vastly different by the end of this pandemic. As we endure the uncertainty of quarantine, we must ask ourselves what kind of world we want to return to for ourselves and our students.

For those aware of the inequities and unfairness that characterized schools in America prior to the crisis, this is also a time to ask: Could the pandemic be an opportunity through which we can bring about educational justice? While rural schools are highly local, they are also a matter of national interest and leadership—as much as highways and interstate commerce—and rural schools are graduating students whose lives will be connected to the rest of the world just as much as those in the big cities.

In that vein, there are lingering equity and policy challenges that will face all of us during and at the end of the pandemic, but especially rural schools and communities, including these:

1. Does the country have the political will to resolve internet inequality?

Nationwide, across all racial and ethnic groups, 16.9 million children remain logged out from instruction because their families lack the home internet access necessary to support online learning (Future Ready Schools et. al, 2020). Those households with children under the age of 18 years lack two essential elements for online learning: high-speed home internet service and a computer. One in three Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native households are not connected.

Rural Americans are also less likely to have a tablet, laptop, or desktop than urban and suburban residents (Khazan, 2020). They trail urban residents by 12 points and suburban residents by 16 points. In Mississippi, which serves 235,000 rural students, the Census Bureau reports that one-fifth of Mississippi households do not have a computer and nearly one-third lack high-speed Internet access (United States Census Bureau). According to the FCC, half of the residents of the Mississippi Delta have no access to the Internet. In addition, nearly all teachers nationally (96%) pay for their home-based high-speed internet themselves (Will, 2020b). And 10% of teachers, mostly in rural areas, don't have high-speed, wireless internet at home (Will, 2020a). They make do during the current school shutdowns with mobile hotspots or even working in parking lots or empty school buildings. Currently, there is a bill in Congress to increase the E-Rate by $4 billion, which would go a long way in providing homes with broadband and connectivity (Will, 2020b).

2. What organizational changes are necessary to move from a factory school to a whole child school model, and what capacity is necessary for schools to serve both as educational institutions and safety net?

The path to educational success is different for each student, and availability to support services also varies. Data tell us that the road to success is tougher for young people who are engaged with the foster care system, are hungry, are parents, face school suspensions, lack secure housing and internet access, have special education needs and language barriers, may be from low-income households or have family members who are victims of the opioid epidemic. These young people need expanded supports to succeed, supports that are often not thought of when planning college access and success programs. If they are not addressed, we allow students to fall through the education, social, and emotional cracks. But the current model and school architecture is not designed to tackle many issues outside of their control. In South Dakota, which is one of the most rural of states, "rural educators often tout the generally lower student-teacher ratio and scores on standardized tests show that students in some rural South Dakota districts match or occasionally out perform their urban peers" (Pfankuch, 2019). Clearly, the school plays the role of community anchor, but a 19th century model is crashing into 21st century needs, the system is overwhelmed, and by its nature produces inequitable results. This is a time

to plan with the community the systemic changes required to respond to the demographic changes hitting urban and rural public schools (Rodriguez, 2020). To integrate via technology, face-to-face and through community organizations, a true community education model enables schools to respond to the needs of the "whole child" (Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child).

3. What are effective strategies and means to address teacher and principal shortages, retention, competition with other school districts, compensation, and professional development?

No small district has the capacity or the market to solve workforce issues on its own. This question requires a state and federally coordinated response, along with input from higher education leaders (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Solutions for urban settings generally do not successfully transfer to rural settings. In addition to dealing with the pandemic, distance learning issues, social-emotional learning, and accountability pressures that all districts face, rural districts also face challenges such as lower salaries, fears of isolation in an unfamiliar area, limited housing and recreational options, lack of human capital and resources, and little opportunity for professional development and professional growth (Schwartz, 2020). These same issues make it harder to recruit school administrators, which further compounds the teacher recruitment problem since teachers want to be supported by a strong administrative staff. As a result, many districts have had to hire teachers and principals without the proper licensure, especially in specialized areas such as working with students with special education needs and English Learners. It also challenges administrators to recruit a diverse teaching force that possesses the cultural competencies needed to work with an increasingly diverse student body and parents.

4. Can rural districts continue to maintain a presence and strong voice at the federal level that sustains and increases funding?

Let's say it up front. Just like healthcare, public education has been underfunded, especially in rural communities. Rural education requires a continued strong federal funding presence. As problematic and bureaucratic as federal funding might be for rural districts—and many do not have the capacity to compete for grants or provide matches—most rural districts and communities rely on federal resources to supplement state and local tax bases. To support schools to meet ESSA requirements, the Rural Education Achievement Program authorizes two rural programs: The Small Rural School Achievement Program and The Rural and Low-Income Schools Program, which increase the focus on rural schools. Other programs that have rural priorities include the Full Service Community Schools, 21st Century Community Schools, Impact Aid, IDEA, Head Start and Early Head Start, in addition to other social and health services such as Medicaid, the Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), CHIP, Summer Feeding, Migrant Education, the Child Care Development Block Grant, and Women with Infants and Children (WIC). The big takeaway is that federal spending on all children's programs dropped from 7.98% in FY 2015 to 7.21% in 2019—confirming a downward trend in federal spending for children (First Focus on Children, 2019).

5. Will states and local communities provide the resources needed to achieve equity and opportunity for rural children and families?

Rural school finance is extremely complex, but at the heart of both state and local finance structure lie issues of economies of scale, local tax assessments, levy rates, local control, and local willingness to support increases in school revenues. Challenges include deferred maintenance to buildings and infrastructure, struggles to provide the same access to high-level courses for rural students, difficulty in retaining teachers, and to add a final nail in the proverbial coffin, the cost of opening school buildings safely during the pandemic, all of which add to the pressures rural schools face.

To date, state school funding systems have been challenged in 45 states, from New York to, most recently, Kansas. Yet because rural schools are not on a level playing field with urban and suburban schools, lack of adequate resources threatens their very existence. Rural school districts thus continue to lag behind urban areas with respect to federal funds. When access to federal programs depends on the absolute number of disadvantaged students rather than proportions, small rural schools typically lose out to affluent metropolitan ones. Federal policies are often based on preparing students for an urban life rather than answering the needs of a rural setting. Rural communities are in great need of institutions that will strengthen rural life, serve all members of all ages in the community, and link education to other social services and economic enterprises within the area. Education must be linked with other rural development activities, and rural development itself should be based on comprehensive rural studies rather than on applications of urban models as determinants of rural life (Parks & Hoke, 1979).

Conclusion

Creating equity and reimagining schooling after the pandemic requires listening to everyone within the community--and building on the assets that rural schools offer. Reimagining requires engaging parents, teachers, principals, support services, health care, business, the Farm Bureau, social services, juvenile justice, and students. While they may not be an economy of scale, rural schools' smaller class sizes support individualized instruction and more teacher attention, conditions that also provide an opportunity to assure that our marginalized communities are part of the conversation.

Not only have tens of millions of families across the country had to play an active role in the "schooling" of their children during the pandemic, but the void left by schools is being felt across multiple dimensions of social, economic, political and community life. Schools are not just places where young people learn; they are also places of community and connection, physical and emotional safety, shelter and food, democracy and deliberation. In addition, the economy cannot function without schools, unless we devise another way to ensure that children are supervised while their parents are at work.

Building on rural assets, beginning to plan, holding our state and federal policymakers accountable--this is what our rural schools and communities are good at. Let's make the mantra "we are all in this together" work for equitable educational opportunities and upward mobility for all of our children. We can do this.

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Rural Equity Series

Practitioner's Perspective: Newcomers and English Learners Living in Small Town America

Amanda Ensor

September 2020



Sudlersville, Maryland, is a small rural town in the far northeastern corner of Queen Anne's County on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It sits about 10 miles from the Delaware state line and 35 miles from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, surrounded by extensive corn, soybean, and wheat fields. The population is close to 600 and growing, with a large influx of immigrants primarily arriving from Central America. As you approach Sudlersville on Route 300, you will spot just one traffic light, a modest statue of the town's most famous citizen (Hall of Fame baseball player Jimmie Fox), one gas station, a small park, and the *de facto* community hubs: Sudlersville Elementary and Middle schools. These schools serve as the beating heart of the town and this rural community in the middle of nowhere. The total number of students enrolled at Sudlersville Elementary School (SES) is 284 for the 2020-21 school year. This number represents a small population with fast-changing demographics. The student population has recently reached close to 50% enrollment by English learners, virtually all of whom are from Latinx families and are native Spanish speakers.

Historically speaking, schools in rural communities in the United States enrolled very few students for whom English is a second language. In fact, for an extended period of time there appeared not to be a special need to formally support families of English Learners (EL) in rural community schools in most of the United States.

The United States Department of Agriculture defines a rural community as a small county town characterized by geographic isolation from other communities. Further, there is

a customary economic dependence on agriculture and frequent periods of economic distress. Under Title VI of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a local education agency is considered rural if the total number of students in average daily attendance at all schools is fewer than 600. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) defines a remote rural school locale as a "census-defined territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area," and "more than 10 miles from an urban cluster." Another characteristic of rural schools is they are more predominantly Caucasian than urban schools (The Education Alliance, 2020). This same study, however, highlighted the rapidly changing demographics and growing needs of rural communities in the United States. Consider the following:

- Only 30% of states have fewer than 5,000 EL students statewide.
- EL student enrollment growth is greater in rural than in urban schools.
- 4% of America's EL students now live in rural communities.
- Rural schools usually hire tutors or aides instead of credentialed EL teachers.
- There are no national models for EL rural programs and policies.
- The rural teacher population often does not reflect the diversity of America.
- Rural schools lack the political power base that urban schools have.
- Teachers in rural schools tend to know little about multiculturalism or EL methodology or curriculum development, or EL student assessment.
- Administrators in rural schools do not tend to place EL policies, programs, budget, or other support mechanisms high among the school's priorities.

How do newcomers and English learners survive and thrive in small-town America?

When I first began my work in Sudlersville, I was baffled by the unexpectedly large number of Latinx families. How and why did these folks find their way to this tiny town? Were they able to access the resources they needed? Would this school understand and embrace their needs and help create a new home for their families, especially the schoolchildren? Would this integration require breaking through barriers created by a smaller, tightly-knit, and historically White community? Or, more likely, would we simply be part of the statistics cited earlier, a district in which teachers and administrators in rural schools know little about the kinds of programming needed to provide our EL families with the support they need for their children to be successful in rural American community schools?

With the financial, educational, and even emotional support of MAEC and the National Center for Families Learning, we have been able to change the momentum of this historical pattern and build a strong community of EL families in Sudlersville. We began our work in October of 2019, with an agreed mission to build a Family Learning Community to assist our entire school community with understanding the power of family engagement. This included developing intentional home-school partnerships, regardless of language barriers (many veteran teachers at Sudlersville, some with at least 15 to 20 years in the community, have watched the changing demographics but avoided embracing the partnerships because of language barriers). Our work over the past year has helped

these teachers understand that strong engagement is powerful and can actually be developed regardless of what native language is being spoken. Ultimately, families look for very similar things from their school communities: clarity that their kids are truly cared for and assisted to academically succeed.

Additionally, we were able to create a program that allowed our EL parents to spend time in their students' classrooms in order to support learning at home. EL parents were encouraged to enroll in free English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) adult education classes held at the school, to begin to improve their understanding and speaking of the English language. They also participated in Parent Time, a structured activity which was held in group meetings with English-Spanish interpreters and was designed to cover topics that would assist parents in building adult life-skills, such as goal-setting, self-care and self-advocacy, mindfulness, technology skill-enhancement, career counseling, and more. Our SES Family Learning Community developed a motto in Spanish as time progressed: todavía no, or "not yet." The families and teachers continued to support one another throughout the year to better understand the power of not yet, as distinguished from "No, I can't," or "No, it's not possible." They came to understand that growth is a matter of committing time and effort to achieve goals. Our families know and believe that someday, with the support of one another and the community in which they live, they will be able to accomplish personal goals as they raise their children and families in small-town America, because their education is valued and prioritized, and they are an important part of the overall school community.

The change in perspective has been equally valuable for teachers. Mrs. D. was a Pre-K teacher at Sudlersville Elementary School whose experience with the program and newly developed relationships with EL families has expanded her view about family engagement. She had been teaching Pre-K in the community for 10 years and was extremely uncertain about this new community of EL families. She wondered, how would we possibly interact with them when we don't speak any Spanish? Is it safe for them to be in our classrooms for such long periods of time? Where will we find time and money to provide them extra resources? How is this going to work? Mrs. D. began the year seeing this program as an additional burden for her and the school.

It took only a short amount of time for Mrs. D. to realize that this new community-based, school-sponsored program for our EL families would have the opposite effect. When asked to reflect on the program at the end of the year, she called the experience "truly uplifting." As a result of the program, "her families" became more confident in their ability to play an active role in their child's education. They gained a much better understanding of the importance of class attendance and how absenteeism could negatively impact their child's learning. She noticed an increased amount of in-classroom participation. Parent involvement became a priority for her. The EL students attended more field trips than previously, participated more in class, and overall their families became more engaged with the school as their educational partner.

Like most teachers, Mrs. D. was devastated by the rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shifting from a well-structured school day at SES to at-home learning overnight created

immense worry about her students. However, she found that those families who had participated in the SES Family Learning Community continued to be highly engaged with her and the school. They were active communicators, responded conscientiously to emails (thanks to devices and hotspots provided by the program), and shared photographs of their children "doing" school at home. She shared that being part of such a community was highly motivating to families, and that her families seemed to know just what to do to help their children continue to learn and grow.

SES Family Learning Community members have praised the very substantial support they received from the school. During a time of extreme hardship and uncertainty—exaggerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—family members felt increasingly capable of continuing to move forward. They have received assistance at home with food and medical needs. The personal learning devices and hotspots have opened new technical doors, and they have embraced learning how to help their children to learn virtually. Further, they have applied self-care practices including gratitude to help them get through the toughest days. Our Latinx population has faced very difficult challenges with the pandemic, in part due to more crowded living conditions, a financial inability to stop working even temporarily, and a lack of access to basic goods in our rural community. However, the todavía no (not yet) mindset helped them push through these challenges. Nothing is taken for granted and they are determined to ensure that their children continue with school.

Rural communities in small-town America can feel very isolating, especially to those who do not speak English. It is hard to fit in. It is hard to ask for help. And it is hard to make a new home without leaving your old home and cultures behind. Our Pero, todo es posible: Si, se puede Family Learning Community at Sudlersville Elementary School has helped build a new home for our EL families. Many have become community and education advocates, as well as cultural leaders. Some, even new small business owners. Most importantly, almost all have become dear friends to each other and to the school staff and administrators. And when one thinks they cannot accomplish something, they remember it's only a matter of *todavía no…not yet*!

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Rural Equity Series

Equity and Expectations: Leading Rural Communities through Unprecedented Pressures

Erin McHenry-Sorber and Daniella Hall Sutherland September 2020

Rural schools are often considered to be the heart of the community, serving as social centers and often, a major source of local employment (Schlafft, 2016). They provide spaces for local organizations, community fundraising events, community gardens or farms, family education centers, and other sources of civic engagement. Community members gather at rural schools for sporting events and student performances.

Beyond their walls, rural schools are also integrated into the life of the community, partnering in formal and informal ways with parents, grandparents, churches, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses to promote community development while strengthening rural families and youth. These collaborations aid in promoting student success by focusing on the wellness of the whole child, family, and community as entities inextricably connected to student success.

Rural educational leaders are central to their communities. They may attend local church services, shop at community businesses, or serve as members of local organizations (Lamkin, 2006). Not all rural school leaders live close to school, but almost all are highly visible in the surrounding communities. Some scholars describe this phenomenon as operating in a fishbowl of attention (Burdge, 2006). One rural school principal shared how the high visibility affected him and his family. He said, "Anytime I'm in public, my wife, she'll say, 'You're too serious when we go out,' and I'll say, 'Baby, I have to be. Somebody's watching us.' She thinks I'm paranoid, but every place we go somebody says, 'Hey Mr. [Knight]!' So…when I'm out in public, I'm always a little guarded. When I go home I can be more myself than I can anywhere else. Home is inside my house. When I hit that driveway, I can breathe a little bit."

This additional scrutiny of rural educational leaders creates simultaneous advantages and disadvantages for equity work. Rural leaders' integration into community life can aid them in creating and sustaining collaborative relationships with community organizations to support equity practices. For example, some rural school leaders partner with local religious organizations for a range of volunteer activities, including "backpack programs"—feeding programs designed to ensure students have access to three meals each day when they are not in school. Rural school leaders can also facilitate essential connections between community members. One Vermont principal leveraged his role as a community leader; his regular informal conversations with local families provided him with significant understanding of the dynamics of the community. He used this information to connect unemployed residents with local businesses who were hiring, and families in need of emergency housing with local landlords.

The visibility and centrality of rural leaders creates challenges for equity work, however. Rural administrators, like most educational leaders, are beholden to local, elected boards of education, who, theoretically, represent the most powerful interests of the local community. Rural school leaders are also influenced by those without formal positions, who have power due to their positions, such as local business owners, or members of prominent local families. Both official and unofficial community leaders can wield significant power in schools, influencing curriculum, resource allocation, and administrator tenure, and are unlikely to give up some of that power in the name of increased equity (Hall, 2016). Further, rural leaders themselves can be resistant to change. Unless they are specifically hired as reformers, rural leaders have historically been selected to lead rural schools and districts because they represent dominant community interests (Mayo, 1999; Nestor-Baker, 2002).

In northern Pennsylvania, for example, a large influx of Spanish-speaking students with special education needs entered a rural school system in the wake of the economic boom associated with fracking. At the same time, local low-income residents were largely displaced from rental units and faced new job insecurities because of the influx of new workers. Leaders in the rural school system attended to the needs of local students, with staff members even buying some children new shoes. These same leaders, however, met the needs of incoming students within a framework of compliance. Instead of instituting system-wide responses to meet their needs as they did with local youth, school leaders responded to newcomers' needs within the minimum required state and federal mandates. As part of local community power structures, their attention was placed on meeting the needs of locals rather than community outsiders, who they blamed for new burdens placed on local families, and who were different, particularly in terms of language and race (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017).

While the above illustration highlights economic and racial equity challenges, scholarly attention to such issues in rural settings is relatively new. There is a plethora of urban-centered equity research, yet our study is the first to explore the ways rural leaders implement state equity policies in their schools. Our research, funded by the Spencer Foundation, explores this leadership imperative in the American southeast, Appalachia, and the northeast with a focus on economic and racial equity issues. Some of the early

findings from our study suggest it can be profoundly difficult for educational leaders to discuss inequities that are present in the broader community (Sutherland & Williams, 2019). In South Carolina, racial inequity has a long, brutal legacy that continues to affect schools today. "Race here is the third rail," said one rural principal, continuing, "You grab that one, that's a problem. You have to be really careful with it… You feel ashamed about what's happened in the past, so you want to do better than your forebearers, but you don't really know what to do…You don't know what to say. And in this day and age, the idea is that people are so …one word can just really do you in, you know? You just don't talk about it."

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights and exacerbates preexisting rural inequities. For example, many rural parents lack the flexibility to stay home with their children during the school day, generating pressure to school systems to open their buildings in the midst of the pandemic. For rural school system leaders, the choice is between being responsible for potential loss of life or for the loss of jobs for local families. Beyond access to academic opportunities, COVID-19 has highlighted the pervasive epidemic of food insecurity for rural youth. Rural school systems scrambled to find ways to get food to children in need, including the delivery of meals through school bus routes or offering families multiple days of food at school building pick-up sites.

But, as this pandemic rages on, there are pockets of hope in rural communities. As inequities have been exposed, rural leaders, community leaders, and state leaders are forced to respond. For example, when school buildings closed in spring 2020, many rural families lacked access to broadband or technological devices necessary to participate in live instruction. These students, often already behind their peers academically, fell even further behind. Yet it also provided a crucial opportunity to draw attention to the inequities of broadband access in rural areas (NREA, 2020). In Maryland, districts were awarded grant money this summer to provide internet hot spots in homes without broadband access. Some rural South Carolina districts also converted school buses into Wifi hotspots, which they parked in central areas in the community. Families parked nearby, giving students the opportunity to participate in online work from the safety of a vehicle.

We also have observed powerful examples of successful collaboration between rural leaders and communities to advance educational equity. For instance, in one predominantly Black, rural community, the new school principal recognized the school furniture was unchanged from when she had attended decades prior. Using her knowledge of the district's policies, the principal promptly acquired new furniture and other resources for free, all of which were already available to the non-rural schools in the district. She also leveraged community connections to support the school, such as contacting local church leaders for support when critical issues were before the District's Board of Trustees. One of her colleagues explained, "If I go out there right now and send a notice to all the churches that says, 'Next Monday, we're going to pack [the board meeting],' they'll load up that church van. They'll load up the guys and they'll be there." These early findings suggest rural leaders can facilitate connections to build local support for equitable work in their schools.

Problems like persistent poverty and racism in rural communities are too great for schools to tackle alone. They require the formal partnership of community organizations and informal assistance of individuals and families to mitigate decades or centuries of inequities. And, they require resources in order to build and sustain successful partnerships. Long-term flexible investment from multiple entities, including states, are necessary to rural schools and communities to meet their specific needs. With attention turned to rural communities at this moment in time, we can be hopeful about the future.

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Rural Equity Series

MAEC

When Pandemic Meets Endemic: Injustice in Our Rural Homes

J. Spenser Darden

September 2020

I still remember when the email came.

> "In my 40 years as a university president, the crisis at hand is like none other I have ever experienced... For the remainder of the semester, all classes...will not be conducted in-class and will [instead] be delivered in an alternative format."

Less than a week after Governor Jim Justice in my home state of West Virginia announced the closing of all K-12 schools, and one day after the state's first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), all in-person activities associated with the university at which I work were cancelled for the remainder of the semester.

Beginning in places like Seattle and Los Angeles, moving east to New York City, the virus wreaked havoc on communities with a common refrain: coronavirus disproportionately affected older adults. This analysis ignored unreported factors that demonstrated time and again to be a critical factor in health disparity. Analyses failed to capture the disproportionate impact COVID-19 had on lower-income communities, rural communities, and communities of color – let alone any thoughtful dissection of the intersections therebetween. As we have too-often failed to do in the history of our country, narratives being constructed around the United State's response to this unprecedented crisis were largely whitewashed and sub/urban-focused.

In the throes of this global pandemic, one which gave rise to a rash of layoffs and furloughs that pushed unemployment claims to the double-digits, the comorbidity of endemic racism transfixed the nation. We watched with horror a video in which two armed White men hunted down and murdered Ahmaud Arbury, a Black man, in Georgia. We witnessed the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minnesota. We learned of the murders of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman, in Kentucky; and Nina Pop, a Black trans woman in Missouri; and Tony McDade, a Black trans man in Florida; and...

And in communities large and small, including in our rural homes, Americans (largely college-aged) took to the streets demanding to be heard. We were demanding justice. We were demanding fairness. We were demanding equity.

While the unjust killings of Black Americans, particularly by police, took center-stage, the demand for justice is broad, focused on policies that exclude, demean, and dehumanize. In our rural communities, that means understanding how racism couples with place-based discrimination to magnify the impacts of, say, a global health crisis.

Racism

In his highly-acclaimed book *How To Be An Anti-Racist,* historian and scholar Dr. Ibram X. Kendi defines racism as "a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities." Often we think about racism as obvious, indefensible remarks or actions that result in physical violence against people or communities of color. We conceive of racism as a character flaw or moral failure, rather than more accurately understanding racism as a descriptor of dehumanizing behavior. It is for these reasons that Justin* – a Black man – never felt a part of his rural, central West Virginia community. Having recently embarked on his senior year of college, Justin and I talked about how he experienced racism growing up in a state that is home to one of the Whitest populations in the nation.

> "People are always like 'oh my God, you're from West Virginia, it must have been so horrible' but like, it was never really someone calling me the n-word – I mean that happened. But it was more like being told 'oh, my dad would never let me date you' by a girl I liked or 'shouldn't you be better at basketball?' stuff like that…"

What Justin described to me repeatedly throughout our conversation elucidates the insidiousness of racist ideas: a casual disregard for the humanity of someone deemed "other." It is this disregard and dehumanization and othering that has resulted in people of color being left out or kept out, forced to seek special dispensation from a society built around – rather than for or with – them.

In and of themselves, these racist ideas are harmful. But it is the racist policies that both generate and are generated from racist ideas that protestors from Macon, Georgia, to Mashpee, Massachusetts, and Lexington, Virginia, to Lowell, Oregon, were – and are – rallying against, such as these:

- The racist idea of the sub-humanity of Native and Indigenous people, coupled with the racist policy of establishing Indian Residential Schools, links directly to the racism that Native and Indigenous people experience now.

- The racist policy of the capture and sale of Africans to do forced, uncompensated labor as slaves, coupled with the racist idea that Africans needed "civilizing," links directly to

the racism Black and African American people experience now.

- The racist policy of the Chinese Exclusion Act, coupled with the racist idea that the immigration of Chinese people into the budding nation would bring pestilence, links directly to the racism Asian and Asian American people experience now.

The generational legacy of racist policies (redlining, Japanese internment, even the criminalization of marijuana) inextricably links to the racist ideas of inferiority to White people and creates this self-fulfilling cycle of disparate treatment.

Placism

Defined by Lorna Jimerson in her 2005 article *Placism in NCLB – how Rural Children are Left Behind* as "[bias] against school systems and students in America's rural communities… the discrimination against people based on where they live," placism describes the benevolent paternalism often directed towards rural communities. Whether ignorant or ill-intended, attitudes toward rural communities often assume a complacency or downright hostility toward change. We have largely been taught not to view place as a discrete, important characteristic or identity, and therefore are left without language to describe our experiences of dehumanization.

> "Yea, growing up in [my hometown], it was like…OK (laughs). Like, no one came and usually no one left either. And I even tell people here where I'm from and they haven't even heard of it. So I guess it's kind of like, we didn't matter. But we mattered to us, you know? That's what it's like to live in West Virginia, too. Like, people don't even know we're a state; they think we're part of Virginia."

What Justin described as we talked about his experiences growing up mirrored the way he described his racialized experience. He felt, and continues to feel, a general disregard toward what the people of his hometown experience, and an overall dehumanizing tenor to how they are viewed or described. And it has been this disregard and dehumanization and othering that has resulted in rural communities being left out or imposed upon, forced to demand attention from a society built around – rather than for or with – them.

In and of themselves, the placist ideas are harmful. But it is the placist policies that both generate and are generated from, placist ideas that have magnified the global pandemic for rural communities of color.

The placist idea of the inferiority, backwardness, and uneducated rural community in need of salvation, coupled with placist policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act, and the centuries-long (and continued) exploitation of West Virginia for her wealth of natural resources links directly to the deficit view of rural communities today.

And it is the generational legacy of placist policies inextricably linked to the placist ideas of inferiority to "better-educated" urbanized communities that create this self-fulfilling cycle of disparate treatment.

COVID-19

To understand the state of students of color from or in rural communities in this moment, it is critical to understand how the coronavirus has laid bare the way rural communities and communities of color have largely been tolerated, rather than included. To fully equip people – especially students – in communities across this nation to pursue and achieve happiness, we must observe the ongoing racial justice protests as indictments against dehumanization. All dehumanization. Students of color – a part of and apart from rural communities – are exhausted by an organized assault on their personhood, on their mattering, and are bellowing for support and transformation. While diversity-type trainings and community revitalization projects may make modest gains, this moment demands big solutions. Policies such as universal healthcare, affordable child care, paid family leave, affordable higher education, need-based school funding, a restructuring of tax codes at all levels, environmental justice, and an emphasis on putting people first, are ones that will radically alter life – for all people – for the better. If there is one lesson to be learned from this pandemic creating a nexus of increased attention on race-based and class-based suffering, it is that we must invest anew in the communities we least serve. COVID-19 did not create disparity or the need for equity, but it has exposed the lengths to which our society lacks justice for all.

*The name of the interviewee has been changed to protect his privacy.

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Rural Equity Series

MAEC

Growing Up Rural: Inequity for Young Children and Child Care Providers

Beverly Boals Gilbert, Ed.D. and Cathy Grace, Ed.D. September 2020

Growing up in rural Arkansas and Mississippi, we did not know what we did not know. We knew about dirt roads, walking the railroad tracks, church socials, Dick and Jane basal readers, and how to shell peas. We didn't know how isolated we were, what a public transportation system looked like, and what a rigorous curriculum required. One of the things about being a young child who lives in a rural community where everyone has the same life as you, or worse, is that you don't know you're being left behind or left out.

Cathy's Story

My family was fortunate. Even if I did bathe in a tin tub until I was 3, my family had a television with three channels from Memphis, and we had a truck. My mother, as I got older, was determined I was to participate in activities held 12 miles away in a town of about 5,000 people. I was not totally isolated.



This was taken 45 years ago at my Daddy's store. I am on the left, a parent is in the middle, and the county librarian is on the right. This was my first "kindergarten". The children would walk to Daddy's store and we would read and learn basic skills like ABC's. They would all receive a complimentary ice cream at the end of the weekly "class". The librarian would leave a shelf of books for the children to check out and return during the week.

Not everyone was so fortunate. You could see this in simple ways, like when someone needed to visit the doctor in town. When my brother or I needed our tetanus booster or polio vaccine, my daddy would take us. Other children without transportation also depended on my daddy and his truck to take them to town for doctor visits and other

"serious" errands. If we needed health care, we would all come to depend on anyone with transportation since there was no such thing as a transit system. It is the same way today in many areas, even with telemedicine.

I attended the school for the "country kids" from the first through sixth grades. Most of us rode a school bus, and on my 45-minute daily ride to school, I discovered how unfair the world was, and how mean children could be to those who were different. The "back of the bus" kids knew their place because they were shamed by comments made by others regarding hygiene and outward appearance. In the 1950s, schools in Arkansas were not racially integrated, so my first encounter with inequity was a close-up view of race-driven poverty and the crippling effect it had on the self-esteem and social development of many of my peers.

I made good grades in elementary school, and my third grade teacher rewarded me by giving me extra jobs like starting a school library and serving as a substitute teacher for my peers for two weeks. My good grades came to a screeching halt when I entered junior high school, when children from all over the district converged at one "city" school. The rigor of the curriculum and expectations of my previous small-town teachers were less than those in the city school, and it showed in the learning gaps I had to overcome. These learning gaps are still plaguing rural school children today as a result of myriad funding issues and federal, state, and local policies within public school systems.

During my third grade experience as a two-week substitute teacher, I realized I was destined to become a teacher. After a detour, I graduated college and returned home in the early 1970s as a first grade teacher in a rural school about 5 miles from my childhood home. In the middle of a cotton field, with no air conditioning in the classroom or trees for shade, where 100% of the children lived in poverty, I quickly realized that conditions had to change. After two years of teaching and working on my graduate degree, I received a grant to fund a summer kindergarten program for the community children. It was extremely successful, and the data we collected persuaded the school district to begin full-day kindergarten two years later.

The first grade children I taught in the Mississippi Delta in the mid 1970s lacked the benefit of an early childhood kindergarten experience, just like many children in Arkansas. Schools were under a court order to integrate, but it was clear the district was not interested nor was integration enforced. Of the 1,000 children in grades 1-6 in the school, 99.9% were African American and receiving free lunch. Given that we were a high-poverty, high-minority enrollment school, we got the "leftovers" and broken instructional equipment, as well as incomplete curriculum materials. We had the same materials as other elementary schools in the district, but the condition of the materials was not the same. With a cigar box and rubber bands as my speaker for the "reading machine," I was expected to teach phonics.

The Importance of Defining Rurality and Counting Rural Kids

In 2020, thousands of children living in rural America experience the same challenges of isolationism, poverty, and family dysfunction that we did decades earlier. The differences are even greater because of the digital divide and resource gaps. Some students have limited or no access to technology, failing to expose them to a life outside the 10-mile radius of their home. Others may have broadband, if their families can afford it, but do they have the support needed to master their online lessons? In spite of technology, have they learned more? Has the introduction of technology actually broadened the learning gap? Some of the answers depend on resources, and resources depend on numbers, which can be a problem for rural communities.

The U.S. Census Bureau has defined rural as "all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster" (Ratcliffe et. al, 2016). There are many classifications for rural, typically based on population density, urbanization, and daily commuting patterns. Defining rural is important because population counts, determined by the Census, are tied to the amount of funding allocated by various federal programs serving children and families, the flexibility of how funds may be spent, and representative voice in Congress. Formulas for funding of local education agencies and basic needs are determined by the Census count, including funding of programs such as Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), free- or reduced-priced school lunches for low-income children, teacher training programs, as well as infrastructure programs such as roads and bridges (America Counts, 2020). The historical undercounting of rural children continues to negatively impact the allocation of funds for these children.

Reports such as The Undercount of Young Children, released by the Census Bureau in 2014, and the American Community Survey detail how the undercounting of children, especially those birth through 4-years old, negatively impacts rural communities (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014). According to the Urban Institute, in 21 states the share of the rural population living in hard-to-count areas exceeds the share of the urban population living in hard-to-count areas. In rural areas in New Mexico and Louisiana, for example, approximately half of residents live in a hard-to-count census tract. In rural Hawaii, that share is nearly three-quarters (Gold & Su, 2019).

Various theories are offered as to the lack of participation in rural areas. Common reasons include that many residents use post office boxes rather than physical addresses for mail delivery, making it difficult for enumerators to locate residents; residents fear sharing personal information with the government; and families lack access to complete the Census data online. COVID-19 has exacerbated problems because it is difficult for the U.S. Census Office to secure and keep enumerators employed in isolated areas. The process of collecting data in 2020 is more dependent on technology and connectivity than in 2010, resulting in further problems collecting and record data. Historically, many of these problems have been noted and reported to the Census Bureau, which lists pre-COVID-19 rural count strategies on their website (America Counts, 2020).

Understanding the Impact and Reality of COVID on Rural Child Care Providers

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the painful extent of inequities in rural America, which have not gone away over the last many decades for young children and the people who take care of them. When early care and education professionals in Mississippi were surveyed in the summer of 2020 by the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning at the University of Mississippi and through a focus group of rural early childhood educators organized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, these professionals identified their greatest needs during this time. Their needs included access to supplies, the ability to purchase essential food items, financial and policy support for existing programs, prioritizing child care needs including service to essential workers, and the creation of a grant/loan program during this time of crisis. The pain experienced by rural child care workers comes through in their survey responses, some of which are shared below.

While the pandemic impacted the income of all Americans, the case can be made that families in rural areas were hit harder than others. In 2016, the U.S. Census Bureau issued a report comparing the income differences between urban and rural areas of the country. Looking at all four regions of the country, poverty rates were consistently lower for those living in rural areas than for those living in urban areas, with the largest differences in the Midwest and Northeast (Bishaw & Posey, 2016). With lower incomes due to numerous factors, including a profound difference in the minimum wage between states and an extremely low federally required minimum wage, rural families are financially compromised based on their zip code.

The experiences and stories shared by these professionals describe the need, desperation, uncertainty, and fear of small program owners in small towns and rural areas. There is fear for one's own health, the health of family members at-risk due to compromised immune systems, fear of spreading COVID among the children served and their families. There is fear of an insufficient amount of food to feed the children, fear of a lack of supplies and an inability to obtain the basics.

One professional shared: "Arkansas Department of Health suggested masks for child care workers, but we can't find them and don't have the extra funding for them anyway. The owner's down to one can of disinfectant. Relatives and others are making multiple trips to stores. She's written letters to all the local grocery stores, chamber of commerce, etc. but no help."

Another child care provider described a different but related concern: "To be honest, I did not know what to do. Do I stay open and be a nervous wreck worried I'd disinfected enough. Worried the kids could become sick, thus making me and my husband sick. Babies don't social distance, we are family and it's just not possible. I prayed about what to do and after talking to my daycare families, decided it would be best to shut down."

Financial fear is a great concern. In addition to the fear of loss of income, fears of letting

employees and families down and of having to close looms in many instances. One program owner said, “If our enrollment doesn’t grow after this runs out, we will have to reduce hours and/or send staff home AND put classrooms together. I have single parents and widows on staff who can’t make it work on four hours a day.”

Another shared, “Our current bank account is at $40.00. 90% of our budget is salary. As soon as our income comes in, it goes right out the door through payment to employees. We get tuition one week and spend it on payroll the next.”

Providers note that the waiting time for funds that have been allocated are unreasonable. “There are funds that have been given for supplies, for masks, and basic PPE for childcare, but we are still waiting,” one owner shared.

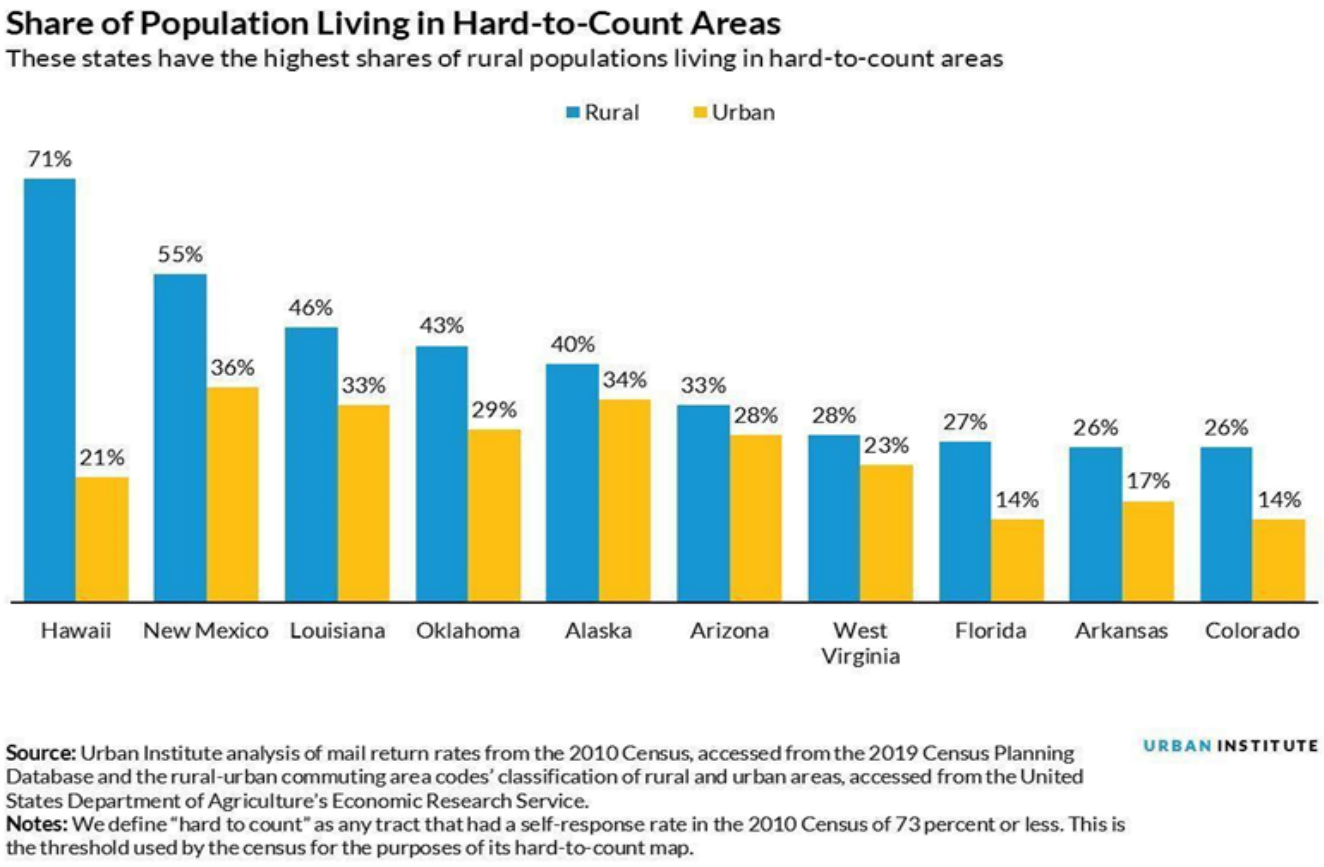
Many professional early childhood teachers and caregivers struggle as they work to serve others. One program owner wrote, “Since this started we have families in need, we are only charging them half tuition. All of this to say we’re basically paying to stay open. I don’t know how long we can do that, of course, it’s not sustainable. We have a business loan, payroll, utilities, of course food, as you’re well aware, etc.--seems out of place still going with no income.” Another shares similar feelings and needs, “Some financial help would have been so appreciated since I had to close. Child care is my chosen profession.”

Providers described cycles of personal frustration and system failure. One child care worker shared, “After this [pandemic] happened I have applied for the Emergency Disaster Loan with no reply, nearly a month after my initial application. I applied for unemployment only to be told that money isn’t available for self-employed people yet. I have applied for and been turned down for the Payroll Protection Program loan because I pay my help using a 1099, I don’t meet the guidelines for assistance. As my bank account depletes, I am forced into applying for SNAP benefits which I would be very relieved if only I knew I could feed my family but that has been a dead end too. It’s been nearly 2 weeks since I placed that application and I called to follow up a few days ago and I was told they haven’t even received my online application yet because their system is so backed up. I have not received a stimulus check because I don’t get a refund therefore mine will have to be mailed and currently, I cannot track that process either. I have zero money coming in and no sign of when help will arrive.”

Survey responses made clear providers’ fear and desperation, as shown in this workers’ plea for support: “There was money to be had, then they ran out leaving my small operation to fall even deeper in the crack of despair. I need to return to work for my families and by work, I mean living. I have no job, no money and no way to live. Please, Please, Please!!! I need HELP. Thank you to whomever reads this letter. God Bless you for anything you will be able to help.”

Rural America Needs Our Help

How much longer can we gamble with the lives of children and families? America can't wait until another medical pandemic hits or the next natural disaster occurs to change its policies and address inequities for young children and their providers in rural communities. We can't expect small towns and small programs to continue to serve the rural communities, parents, and children with limited support. "Equity" and "equality" are terms decision-makers and system implementers have confused since before Brown v. Board of Education and the civil rights movement. As educators who taught in high-poverty schools in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta in the 1970's under "the separate but equal" administrative mindset, it is sad to see so little progress in moving the conversation from equal to equitable systems. We know how and what to do, but do we have the political will?



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MAEC

Parent's Perspective: Living Through Spring 2020 in Rural America

Kristy Brengle

September 2020



I sit here thinking about the past 6 months and it feels like such a blur, but March of 2020 is one month I will never forget.

I have three sons, two of whom were in school last year. They loved their teachers and enjoyed seeing their friends, but my kindergartener was struggling with a new ADHD diagnosis. His teacher was making accommodations to meet his needs. He was struggling to learn to read and the teacher and the paraeducator in the class were working hard to work with him, and each of the other students. Overall, though, school was working pretty well for him and our family had a good routine. My husband went to work early, so I woke the boys up and off we would go. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.

As a mom, I was already doing a lot even before March 2020. By the time we were out the door in the mornings, I was usually sweating and taking deep, calming breaths. I spent a large amount of time in the school myself as the PTA president, arranging assemblies, events and fundraisers for the school. At home, in addition to parenting, I worked as a case manager full-time and had been with my company for 12 years. Some days I worked from home, others I visited clients in their homes.

Then the news came that schools were closing because of COVID-19. In my head, I prepared for a maximum of two weeks that the children would be home from school. I was excited to have them home for a bit--and also annoyed that they closed schools. It was a gift to me that I was an experienced teleworker and that my company had protocols in place when office closures hit. Watching the news, I felt everyone was overreacting and things would go back to normal shortly. Boy, was I wrong, and as the days went on, I learned about and accepted the seriousness of COVID-19.

The email came that we would be doing learning packets at home. I imagined living in a more populated area would make it much easier by having access to high speed internet and broadband. Those students would have more options, such as online programs that were only accessible with reliable internet. We had the option to pick up packets at school or download them and print. I chose to do paper packets because our internet is very slow, and there is only one modem in our home, in my office, that will allow a video connection. The school had a very organized pick-up line to pick these packets up, and they provided supplies needed for the students to do their work.

Being a PTA mom paid off. Through the PTA Facebook page, I was able to arrange some Zoom meetings for the students to see one another and say hi and chat. It made the quarantine a little less boring. I tried fun arts and crafts activities, some of which were successes and others were failures. We got in lots of fun outside play time with fresh air and read some good books. I am thankful for living in a rural area for this reason. Right out our back door, we have a large yard, pool, and driveway where the kids can exercise and play, and a big garden that is fun for digging in the mud. Friends who live in big cities have told me how tough it is not being able to get the kids outside to exercise and have recess. Parks and public areas being closed makes it rough on them.

Being an at-home teacher all of a sudden was hard, however. For my family, it worked best if I worked with the boys in the middle of the day after my meetings and Skype calls for work and while my youngest took his nap. (I had pulled my youngest from his daycare to prevent any chance of exposure to the illness.) We started school work around 12 pm. I am blessed my 3rd grader was able to work on his own so I could focus on my kindergartener. If my 3rd grader had a question, his teacher was available at the drop of a hat. We could call her or Google Meet with her, and she would show on white board how to do the steps to his math work or answer questions about reading. She was amazing! To be honest, it has been a very long time since I have done fractions other than when cooking. She was able to teach him in a way that made sense to him. We sent her uploads of his work and she would provide feedback. I had no concerns about him falling behind.

For my kindergartener, it was a different story. I sat with him to do his work and sent his teacher pictures. She sent him encouraging messages in return. I could see him doing well in math, but I could also see his struggles related to ADHD. He had trouble concentrating, trouble reading. I am not educated in the phonics way of teaching. I was not able to help him. We worked through online learning apps, but that was not enough. He needed his teacher. She was available whenever we reached out to her, but it didn't feel like enough. She has been in the field for many years and understood what he needed and what would work for him. It was hard for me to not be able to help my own child read. It kept me awake many nights worrying about him, his future, and his education. One day he told me I was the best teacher ever. I cried so hard that night after he went to sleep, thinking that maybe I was doing okay. That maybe I wasn't failing.

When I finished the hands-on part of helping them during the day, I would try to get back on the computer to do my own work. Again, my employer was very accommodating. We were given the option of utilizing 80 hours of leave at two-thirds pay to attend to our

children's needs since schools were closed. I felt I needed to use this time to be able to give my kids the attention and help they needed with their work. With the kids home, I was only able to work about 15 hours out of a 40-hour work week. I didn't feel like I could make our life work without using the leave. I had to take time to sit with my children during class or help them with school work, and if my children had a class Google Meet video scheduled, I needed to take leave from work again so they could use my computer. Our internet wasn't strong enough to have more than one person online at a time.

I was trying to keep up with work and wishing each day I had more time to dedicate to my boys' needs. It was depressing. It made me feel incompetent. I reminded myself of our blessings: I was not an essential employee who had to leave home to work. But it has been hard. Some days I had to lock my office door for a call, only to hear my 1-year old screaming "MOMMY!" from the other side. Skype calls with my coworkers were interrupted by him climbing on my lap. (Luckily, my coworkers enjoy a friendly baby wave in the camera). Some of the boys' homework ended up scribbled on or glued together. It was almost impossible. My 1-year-old became even more bonded to me and needed his eyes on me at all times. It wore on me daily. I was being pulled in so many directions and could feel my mental health being jeopardized. I am very grateful for friends and family who are my support system for pep talks and words of encouragement, but it is hard.

In the end, I ended up using all 80 hours of the leave my employer offered because it was just too darn hard to do it all. Here I was a full-time mom and an employee and, during these trying times, getting less pay. Once the 80 hours of leave was gone, my employer offered 400 hours of Expanded Federal Medical Leave, again at two-thirds pay. It is a relief that I will not have to go completely unpaid or resign to help my children with their academic needs. I know other families who do not have this option and attempt to do all their work in the evenings.

Through all of this I know I didn't have it bad. There were kids going hungry in our school. The school principal and staff were working hard to get these students food so they would have something to keep them healthy. I made several trips to the store for the PTA to purchase food for them. The school had been providing breakfast and lunch to these families. Not having those meals was a giant loss.

There were also the kids being left home alone because the parents had no choice but to go to work or get fired. There are a limited number of day care providers in this area. Once COVID-19 hit, some closed their in-home centers, others' enrollment limits were maxed out. I had been on a waiting list for an infant spot with my youngest from the week after I found out I was pregnant until he turned 7 months when there was an opening.

There were kids in abusive homes that now had no escape. Normally these students are in school where the staff and counselor can see the signs and report as needed.

Our school is different from the other elementary schools in our county, because we have many homes without internet. The school was able to give out mobile hotspots, but guess

what? Our school has many homes without internet acbecause there is NO service in our area. We were blessed to have staff members at the school that were going to students' homes to make sure they had food and their assignments and to ask if there was anything they needed.

So, in the end I am grateful my kids got what they needed. But as a parent, I never felt I was giving them the education they needed or deserved. We need equity in internet access throughout our county. Broadband for everyone would help make this situation successful. I would like those making the decisions about our county and state to visit and see what it is like at my house; for example, to make a phone call using a cell phone with unstable signals or experience what it's like to have a Google Meet where everyone freezes and participants continuously log in and out. It is not ideal. We make it work, but my kids need to be in school.

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