Rural Equity Series

Gaining Ground on Equity for Rural Schools and Communities

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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 by 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% of rural preschoolers versus 10% 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% 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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