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ABSTRACT

This theme issue of Basic Education contains five articles on rural schools. "Small Schools: A Political Irony" (Marty Strange) notes the current enthusiasm among education reformers for small schools and the evidence of their effectiveness. Given this context, the question is posed as to why rural communities where small schools are commonplace have to fight against their consolidation or closing. "Preparing Teachers for Our Nation's Rural Schools" (Paul Theobald) makes the case that rural universities should specialize in rural teacher preparation, since preparing lessons anchored in community circumstances and dilemmas is sophisticated pedagogical work. "The Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium" (Alvin C. Proffit, Paul Sale, Ann E. Alexander, Ruth S. Andrews) describes a Virginia teacher education program that offers credits for certain Grayson County high school courses that are applicable to Wytheville Community College or Radford University. Upon completion of the 3-year program, students are eligible for employment with Grayson County schools. "Accountability and Sustainability: The Dual Challenge of Education in Rural Places" (Doris Terry Williams) discusses place-based education, a curriculum that aims to exceed mandated academic standards while engaging schools and students in community development and meaningful work. Examples are offered from South Dakota and Louisiana. "A New Federal Education Program" (Kari M. Arfstrom) examines a recently reauthorized federal program that will channel federal funds to districts in rural communities with fewer than 600 students and will offer a competitive grant program to low-income rural school districts. (TD)

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Rural Schools
Small Schools, Teacher Preparation, Place-Based Education

Anne Rogers Poliakoff, Ed.

Basic Education v46 n 5 Jan 2002

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Vol. 46, No. 5, Jan. 2002

BASIC EDUCATION

A Monthly Forum For Analysis & Comment

RURAL SCHOOLS

Small Schools

Teacher Preparation

Place-Based Education

CBE

COUNCIL FOR BASIC EDUCATION

Vol. 46, No. 5, Jan. 2002

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Anne Rogers Poliakoff, Editor

Editor's Note 1

Small Schools: A Political Irony 3
by Marty Strange

Preparing Teachers for Our Nation's Rural Schools 7
by Paul Theobald

The Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium 11
by A.C. Proffit, P. Sale, A.E. Alexander, & R.S. Andrews

Accountability and Sustainability: The Dual Challenge of Education in Rural Places 15
by Doris Terry Williams

A New Federal Education Program 19
by Kari M. Arfstrom

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EDITOR'S NOTE

My father was the product of a rural Kentucky school of the 1930s. A bright and personable man, who spoke with scarcely a trace of his native accent, he went on to earn a law degree and eventually to practice law in New York City. Yet he never forgot or allowed his children to forget his belief that his rural and southern schooling made him the object of scorn and prejudice on the part of "Easterners."

Like so many rural Americans, my father left his home in search of better economic prospects, but he never shed his sense of "otherness." As we look at rural schools in this issue of *Basic Education*, our authors continually insist that, as a nation, we tend to define "all things rural," in Paul Theobald's words, "as culturally substandard." They ask us to recognize that disdain and disinterest in rural America, as well as cultural definitions that equate success with urban life, continue to shape the context within which rural schools and their students seek to learn and to succeed.

We noted, in our last issue of *Basic Education*, that about one of every four public school children attends school in an urban district. In fact, another one-fourth of the nation's students attend public schools in rural areas and small towns. However approximate these numbers may be, they could set us to wondering about the balance of attention that policy makers and researchers give to urban and to rural schools, given that the numbers of students in each circumstance are so similar. It is not that life is easier in rural America than in our cities: rural schools, like urban schools, serve communities of great diversity, where poverty, unemployment, and weak local economies have had devastating impact.

Our five authors in this issue examine small schools, rural teacher preparation, place-based education, and new federal legislation designed to help rural schools. We begin with Marty Strange, who notes the current enthusiasm among education reformers for small schools and the evidence of their effectiveness. He properly asks how it is, within this context, that rural communities where small schools are commonplace

are having to fight against their consolidation or closing. Paul Theobald's essay makes the case that rural universities should specialize in rural teacher preparation, finding that "preparing lessons anchored by community circumstances and dilemmas is sophisticated pedagogical work." Authors Alvin C. Proffit, Paul Sale, Ann E. Alexander, and Ruth S. Andrews discuss the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium, which brings together the Grayson County School System, Wytheville Community College, and Radford University in a model of teacher preparation that begins training in high school and offers rural students an avenue for becoming teachers who are both well-qualified and prepared to remain in their own communities. Doris Terry Williams writes about "place-based education," a curriculum that aims to exceed mandated academic standards while engaging schools in community development and young people in meaningful work, offering the experiences of Howard, South Dakota, and East Feliciana, Louisiana. Kari M. Arfstrom discusses the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), recently reauthorized under the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act), which will channel federal funds to districts in rural communities with fewer than 600 students and offer a competitive grant program to low-income rural school districts.

The Council for Basic Education recognizes the unique survival challenges that many rural schools face as they try to muster and sustain sufficient finances, capable teachers, dedicated instructional leadership, and offer excellent learning opportunities. CBE encourages rural and small schools to concentrate their energies on the opportunities and strengths that come from their circumstances. They have the advantage over large school systems in engaging their communities, enhancing the identity of the learning community, and drawing upon the support and pride evident in the rural and small school community, an advantage often lost and difficult to recapture in urban K-12 districts.

ARP

SMALL SCHOOLS: A POLITICAL IRONY

By Marty Strange

There is an irony inherent in our current national interest in small schools as an essential element of school improvement. While professors, politicians, and pundits praise the prospect of smaller schools in places—usually urban—that don't yet have them, they often regard smaller schools as an expensive luxury in places—usually rural—where they have long been the custom.

To be sure, urban interest in small schools has never been higher. The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national network of school reform leaders from seven cities, touts them as "schools where equality, justice, and opportunity are common practice." The Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois-Chicago beckons urban districts to "think small." The Bank Street College of Education reports that breaking up big city schools into smaller ones is crucial to school reform.

In fact, a large body of scholarly work concludes that when it comes to schools, small works. In small schools:

- Students learn more and better.
- Students make more rapid progress toward graduation.
- Students are more satisfied, and fewer drop out.
- Students behave better.
- Disadvantaged students, particularly, perform better.

The last point was made strikingly clear in a series of studies by Craig Howley and Robert Bickel using test score data in states with widely differing school systems (Georgia, Montana, Ohio, and Texas). They found that the larger the school, the more powerful the negative effect of poverty on student achievement. Moreover, the benefit of smaller schools seems to be particularly important at the age when students are most at risk of dropping out. And while children of all races are as

likely to be affected by these relationships, minority children are more often enrolled in schools that are too big to achieve top performance. Researcher Mary Anne Raywid concludes that the benefits of small schools have been "...confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research."

Why do small schools work? Kathleen Cotton, with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, says we know why. Every child's participation is needed; adults and students know and care about each other; parents are involved; people

For rural students, closing their schools means . . . less involvement, less access . . . probably lower test scores.

feel that they count; they take more responsibility for their actions; classes are smaller; scheduling more flexible; and more use is made of instructional strategies that work, including team teaching, integrated curriculum, multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, and performance assessment. So it is no wonder that a growing number of education leaders are warming to the small school as part of the solution to seemingly intractable problems of urban education.

Why then, is it the policy *de jour* in so many states to close or consolidate small schools in rural areas where they are commonplace rather than an item on the reform agenda? From Arkansas to Alaska to Nebraska to West Virginia, rural people are locked in political battles to keep what they have, and what others want.

For rural students, closing their schools means less participation, less involvement, less access, less belonging, and probably lower test scores, especially in the poorest rural communities. And it certainly means longer bus rides, which are already distressingly long in many rural communities, with current research showing that students in those schools serving the poorest rural communities face the worst situation. Some students testified at a recent public hearing in West Virginia that they spend as much time on the bus as in the

classroom.

The national disinterest in small schools that are rural is reflected in poorer facilities, lower teacher pay, and higher teacher turnover. Suburban superintendents know that the most fertile ground for recruiting good teachers is the rural school that cannot afford to compete for the services of the best free-agent teachers on its faculty.

To be fair, there are concessions to small rural schools in some state funding formulas. Even here, however, there is often a mixed message. For example, some states provide more transportation subsidies for sparsely populated rural school districts. But that subsidy supports longer bus rides, and is a back-door inducement to consolidate. Some states offer front-door incentive payments that directly reward consolidation.

Why are small schools that already exist in rural areas so disrespected? Partly because they are in communities considered forsaken, left behind by development, suffering depopulation, and sure to go away, eventually.

You also hear that rural schools are *too* small. "We need smaller schools all right, but not *that* small."

But small and rural schools also suffer from a lack of glamour. Just keeping what we have is not very exciting. After all, if it isn't new, no one can claim credit as the genius behind it. Maybe small rural schools do not need genius. Maybe all they need is the money to renew their facilities, to pay competitive salaries to good teachers, and to invest in new technology.

Students testified . . . that they spend as much time on the bus as in the classroom.

Ah, there's the rub. The root of indifference towards existing small schools lies in their claim on the treasury of the state. Because rural areas are poor—poorer in fact than metropolitan areas as a whole—many require state aid. So, of course, do many urban schools. The affluent suburbs, now a majority whose political power is substantial, casts a worried eye both inward and outward.

Their complaint is often that poorer school systems—both

rural and urban—"waste" resources. Urban schools are big institutions, and the case against them often requires criticism of complicated management and budget decisions or politically loaded condemnation of unions. But the case against rural schools is simpler: they are just too small to be efficient. Enough said. Never mind the research showing that cost per graduate in small rural schools is actually quite competitive, simply because their graduation rates are so high. To the affluent, small schools are an expensive luxury that ought to be reserved for those who can afford them.

But even in the suburbs, the bloom is off the rose on large schools because of the alienation, hostility, and violence that are too much a part of the large-school environment. So the politics of small schools can be expected to become increasingly complex.

One-fourth of the nation's public school students attend schools in rural areas and small towns. Their schools are generally small. Many are excellent, but many more are dilapidated, can't get or keep their share of the best teachers, and are fiscally asphyxiated by state policies designed to induce them to close. For the students in these schools, the question is whether communities will be able to keep their small schools and make them better, surviving the disdain in which they are held even as small schools become the rage elsewhere.

Marty Strange is Policy Director for the Rural School and Community Trust.

PREPARING TEACHERS FOR OUR NATION'S RURAL SCHOOLS

By Paul Theobald

Rural teacher preparation is not a popular topic. The same cannot be said for teacher preparation geared to the urban environment. One can expect accolades for engaging in that endeavor. But preparation for teaching in rural locales is widely considered to be a futile task. For one, rural schools are perceived to be constantly closing, and for another, thanks to what R. Williams calls the "hegemony of the metropolis," in *The Politics of Modernism,* all things rural are culturally defined as substandard.

Still, despite nearly a century of consolidation, rural schools represent two-thirds of the nation's total. And rural students represent about 25 percent of all school children. Poverty and jobless rates in rural America have slightly eclipsed the same rates in America's urban centers. Diversity percentages in rural America mirror those in urban locales. In fact, all the circumstances that coalesce to make urban teacher preparation a noble university mission are in place with respect to rural America as well. But our cultural predisposition to denigrate rurality keeps universities located in rural areas from declaring rural teacher preparation to be a central part of their mission. On the other hand, urban universities are quick to claim urban teacher preparation as a key to what they are all about.

Rural schools represent two-thirds of the nation's total.

This dynamic plays out in other ways as well. You will often hear an argument at rural universities that goes something like this: *not all of our graduates will end up teaching in rural schools. Some will teach in cities. So we cannot specialize in rural teacher preparation.* But it is just as true that some of

those prepared in urban universities will teach in rural schools. This doesn't stop the urban university from specializing in urban teacher preparation.

It is not hard, either, to pick up on a kind of status-oriented pecking order in terms of teaching positions. Those who teach in America's large urban or suburban schools tend to think of themselves as better teachers than those who work in small

Our cultural embrace of the hegemony of the metropolis adversely affects the world view . . . of . . . rural youth.

rural schools. This anti-rural bias is so pronounced in our culture that rural teachers sometimes internalize this pecking order, too. So do their students. In fact, in countless ways, rural students are taught to believe that they are not as well prepared as those students who attend large urban schools.

All of these circumstances point to reasons why rural universities ought to specialize in rural teacher preparation. In fact, one could easily go so far as to argue that they have a moral obligation to do so. Recognizing 1) that the exigent conditions created by America's rural political economy are every bit as dire as those conditions created by America's urban political economy; and 2) that our cultural embrace of the hegemony of the metropolis adversely affects the world view, and therefore the life chances, of America's rural youth—these circumstances both constitute strong arguments for special preparation of those who would teach in rural America.

Nearly everyone has heard this familiar quip: "A teacher is a teacher no matter what the locale." There may be a little truth to this. But how one teaches should depend on the students, their educational level, their disposition toward learning, their past experiences in school, the school experiences of their parents—and the list could go on to include such things as religious background, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, language background, etc. Getting to know these things about one's students means getting to know the student's community, for most of these conditions are in some significant

ways related to the locale, or the immediate community, from which the students come. As previously noted, the larger culture teaches rural kids to make assumptions about their learning prospects given their locale. It does this in countless ways, but the characters Larry, Daryl, and Daryl on the *Bob Newhart Show* provide a clear example of one way.

Rural teacher preparation ought to yield leverage over cultural obstacles that interfere with the aspirations of rural youth. At the same time, and to the same end, it ought to yield leverage over shallow definitions of what constitutes success in life. Most rural youth grow up believing that success is found in urban America, for example. If thoughtful rural teachers do not challenge these kinds of messages, the decay of America's rural communities will continue unabated. Boarded-up main streets, closed businesses, deteriorating dwellings—all legitimate shallow cultural messages about rural backwardness.

It turns out that there is much that rural teachers should know about their students and the communities the students come from. Focused study in the college classroom can help, but fieldwork in rural schools is key to the formation of teachers capable of performing at high levels in rural locales. Lessons in the traditional school subjects—art, music, science, social science, math, and language arts—can all be significantly enhanced by the circumstances, conditions, and dilemmas that surround a particular place on earth, i.e. a particular community.

Students . . . arrive at a better understanding of life sciences by doing an audit of local flora and fauna.

Students can arrive at a deeper understanding of, say, mathematics, when it is used to chart the trajectories of local disposable income. They arrive at a better understanding of life sciences by doing an audit of local flora and fauna. They understand history as a force in one's life when they chart the historical developments that have left their community in its

current condition. They understand the power of aesthetics in one's life when their efforts in art class culminate in a community mural, or when the music class captures the ethos of an era and shares it with other generations.

Preparing lessons anchored by community circumstances and dilemmas is sophisticated pedagogical work. Academic immersion in the dynamics of rural places can help create the wherewithal to do it. Instructional practice in rural schools is important, too. Understanding traditional school subjects as leverage over life's circumstances is crucial. Doing this well requires an intellectual connection to local circumstances. This legitimates teacher preparation geared toward a special environment, be it rural, urban, or perhaps even suburban.

The "bonus," so to speak, that comes with the preparation of teachers geared to rural locales is that it results in students who are better prepared to survey the status of their communities and do something about local conditions. That is to say, it elevates the public purposes of education while not diminishing what traditional school subjects can do in the pursuit of private aims. Said differently, teachers prepared to execute lessons that result in deep understanding of the immediate locale are contributing to the health of America's democratic arrangements and are more squarely addressing the reasons America embraced free schooling for all.

Paul Theobald is Dean of the School of Education and Counseling at Wayne State College.

THE APPALACHIAN MODEL TEACHER CONSORTIUM

By Alvin C. Proffit, Paul Sale, Ann E. Alexander, and Ruth S. Andrews

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the fact that American public schools are facing serious teacher shortages, and many school districts are feeling that shortage and competing for a diminishing supply of teachers, at a time when there is a growing need for licensed teachers in a wide variety of specializations. Factors contributing to the teacher shortage include retirement, voluntary resignations, fewer teachers in training, and swelling student populations. This situation is exacerbated for poorer rural districts. Rural school districts experience a double jeopardy when attempting to recruit those teachers who happen to be available, regardless of their preparation.

Seeking a solution to this problem, the Grayson County School System, Wytheville Community College, and Radford University joined together to design and implement an innovative model of teacher preparation, the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium. The initial development of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium began as administrators of the Grayson County School System met separately with administrators from Wytheville Community College and from Radford University to discuss the scarcity of teachers. These initial meetings involving the three institutions led to great interest on the part of each potential partner. From this point forward, the work of designing the consortium was primarily done in a relaxed, informal atmosphere at different sites. The result was a model that would allow high school students to move more quickly into teaching.

Primarily by completing high school courses already in place, a student at Grayson County High School can obtain as much as 32 hours of college credit. Once these hours are successfully completed, they are guaranteed to transfer toward

an Associate of Arts in Education from Wytheville Community College and a Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Radford University. Upon recommendation from Radford, a state-approved program, the state licenses the new teachers.

Qualifying students may graduate from Grayson County High School with enough college credit to be classified as sophomores. However, students in the consortium program are

Qualifying students . . . graduate from Grayson County High School with enough college credit to be classified as sophomores.

not required to complete any set number of dual credit hours. The model provides for individual programs of study that may result in a wide range of college credit obtained by individual students in the program.

After high school graduation, students will study one year at Wytheville Community College, primarily taking child development and general education courses. For most students in the program, this means that they can enjoy the lower tuition rates of the community college, while reducing room and board expenses by living at home. Students who finish the Associate of Arts in Education from Wytheville have earned a pro forma admission to Radford University and its Teacher Education Program in the College of Education and Human Resources.

Once at Radford, students enter the third year of the consortium program.This consists of upper level general studies and introductory education courses. Should they choose, students also have the option to attend Radford University immediately after graduating from Grayson County High School. Admission to Radford is pro forma at any point if the student meets the consortium program's criteria.

The fourth year at Radford is the professional year. In the first semester, students divide their time between attending education courses at the university and observing and

working in the public schools. During this semester students are offered immediate feedback and direction from both university professors and participating schoolteachers. This intensive educational experience is both proactive and reactive.

For the purpose of diversity, the university will attempt to place students of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium in schools that are very different from the ones to which the students are most accustomed. We hope to find urban sites to provide students in the consortium program with an even more diverse experience as they study the complexities of becoming a teacher.

During the second semester of their professional year, students experience traditional student teaching. Consortium students return to the Grayson County School System to do their student teaching. The very fact that student teachers of any kind are available to Grayson County from Radford is a newly established benefit, in and of itself. Until the time of the consortium, Grayson County had never enjoyed the benefits of student teacher placements from Radford University, due to the problems of proximity recently discussed by A. Azinger in *New Directions for Community Colleges.*

Immediately upon completing the program, students are eligible for employment with Grayson County Schools. These graduates will have had an extended and integrated schooling experience with their parent community. We believe that this

These graduates will have had an extended . . . schooling experience with their parent community.

will help combat the "bitter harvest" or "brain drain" that rural communities are suffering as a result of the loss of large numbers of the better educated among their residents, especially the young, who are emigrating to metropolitan areas in search of more and better jobs.

Grayson County, Wytheville Community College, and Radford University will all benefit from the consortium.

Grayson will be able to cultivate Radford University teacher candidates for employment in their district. Wytheville Community College will be able to fulfill its mission by offering an affordable program of excellent quality covering the first two years of the teacher candidate's higher education career. Radford University will be able to offer good placements to its student teachers at a time when there is a dearth of placement options. Finally, and importantly, the model readily provides an avenue for preparing well-qualified teachers to return to their communities of origin.

Alvin Proffit is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at Western Carolina University.

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: THE DUAL CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION IN RURAL PLACES

By Doris Terry Williams

Successful communities don't concentrate on deficiencies or look for outsiders and professionals to fill their needs. Successful communities use the talents of people, the web of local associations, the strength of institutions and their available land, property, and economic power to create new opportunities for themselves. Luther Snow, *The Organization of Hope: A Workbook for Rural Asset-Based Community Development.*

Rural communities struggle daily for survival, challenged on the one hand by demographic changes, economic stress, and the loss of their youth to out-migration, and on the other by persistent patterns of discrimination, power relationships, and competition over the use of their natural resources. Most often, their greatest hope lies in their ability to draw strength from within, to create opportunities and solutions for themselves. In many rural places, schools are the last remaining public institution, the central storehouse of intellectual capital, and the controllers of the largest pool of public wealth. Rural schools, the adult professionals and the young people who populate them, hold the greatest potential for improving and sustaining rural places, yet, rarely is this role realized.

Few people would dispute the need for high academic standards and greater accountability in public schools. Yet rural schools face a special challenge in striving to meet high standards while remaining the most important resource for sustaining their communities. Educators and lay citizens alike

often feel torn between two goals: raising student performance on standardized tests in order to improve academic success and the community's image, versus engaging in locally responsive community development. The complexity of rural issues, coupled with the scarcity of internal resources, places a greater burden and value on all those resources, including young people, their skills and knowledge. Schools are often put in the position of hastening the demise of their community by preparing and encouraging young people to leave, their departure becoming an indicator of success.

Rural places around the country are effectively meeting these challenges through "place-based education," a community-responsive curriculum that aims at improving schools and communities by strengthening the ties between them. Rural places as far apart and as diverse as Howard, South Dakota, and East Feliciana, Louisiana, are using place-based education to address local needs while meeting, even exceeding, state standards.

Howard (Miner County), South Dakota

Miner County is a 576-square-mile prairie community whose eight towns were once home to more than 8,000 people. Today, the county population is 2,700 and working age residents outnumber available service and farm employment. Howard High School, serving fewer than 200 students in grades 9-12, is one of four schools in the county, which once had 73.

In 1995, the Howard School District received funding from the Annenberg Rural Challenge to connect rural schools with their communities. The work began with two class projects, one of which was a survey conducted by the school's Future Business Leaders of America, to analyze the county's cash flow and craft solutions. Upon analysis of the survey results, the students determined that if residents increased their local spending by 10 percent, the economy would gain more than $2 million a year. Multiplied by an economic factor of 3.1, total gain would exceed $7 million.

These findings grew into a community-wide movement. In one year, taxable sales increased by 27 percent. Five years later, the community had exceeded initial projections for increased local revenue several times over. Educators, students, and

community members credit student-initiated work for the positive changes they are now experiencing. As one person put it, "We know the heart of the work began in the classroom; we also know that to continue our existence in rural America, we need the help of everyone. The process will not be quick, easy or supported by everyone. We do know however, if we do not begin with the youth, our future as a living community is very much in doubt."

Miner County . . . students are learning the skills to succeed without having to leave town.

Today, all Howard High School students and some younger students are involved in place-based education, drawing upon and giving back to their community. Miner County Community Revitalization (MCCR), a nonprofit organization that grew directly out of the students' work, embraced the philosophy of place-based education and incorporates student work into its community improvement. In 1999 the Northwest Area Foundation awarded MCCR $500,000 for community revitalization, and recently, $5.9 million in matching funds over five years.

As a result of these changes, Miner County is finding new life and its students are learning the skills to succeed without having to leave town. Howard schools continue to rank above the state and national averages on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9). On average, Howard high school graduates rank among the highest in freshman year GPAs at state universities.

East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana

Its name means "happy land," yet East Feliciana Parish is among the poorest places in one of the nation's poorest states. The parish is 79 percent African American and ever cognizant of oppression and discrimination. More than 40 percent of adults do not have a high school diploma. When Louisiana instituted a statewide accountability program, East Feliciana's schools had to show substantial increases in standardized test scores to avoid "corrective action" and loss of local control.

Concentrating first on elementary science, district

administrators found their solution in place-based education aligned with state standards. They believed that placing science in the hands of students in the context of real life would enable deeper learning and recall of scientific concepts. Whereas some place-based educators begin with local or cultural expectations and match them to state standards, East Feliciana began with the state standards, tailoring them to the community. District Superintendent Daisy Slan noted, "We always knew the community was there but we never thought to reach out and invite them in."

Novices at place-based education, school and community are already seeing the rewards of working together. After the first year, fourth graders increased their passing rate on the state science test from 72 percent in 2000 (10 points below the state average) to 85 percent in 2001 (the state average).

Standards and accountability measures are society's attempt to define what education should give a child. What state and national standards hold as important in student learning and what standardized tests purport to measure, however, are often difficult to accomplish within an individual teacher's interpretation of standards. Place-based education is an attempt not to undermine but to exceed mandated standards, to connect schools and communities in ways that engage young people in meaningful work and give them a sense of place.

Reaching beyond state and national standards, place-based education brings other priceless benefits: engaging students traditionally not well served in public schools, reducing classroom discipline problems, engaging the public in ways that renew their commitment to and faith in public education. It invites students to "experience the world's richness, empower[s] them to ask their own questions and seek their own answers, and challenge[s] them to understand the world's complexities" (see J. G. Brooks and M. G. Brooks, *The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*). Place-based education redefines standards and accountability in a way that honors indigenous knowledge and culture and gives every child the tools needed to live and contribute well wherever he or she chooses.

Doris Terry Williams is Director of Capacity Building for the Rural School and Community Trust.

A NEW FEDERAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

By Kari M. Arfstrom

More often than not, legislators, reporters, and researchers overlook rural and small schools. When was the last time a specific piece of state or federal legislation did more than pay lip service to rural school districts? Or you read about a small school in a major news outlet? Or discussed a study of a rural school and community with a colleague? While we can find token references to rural schools, for the most part suburban and urban school districts receive the bulk of attention.

This will change in the very near future. On January 8, 2002, President Bush will sign the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which reauthorizes the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), originally signed into law in 2000 with little fanfare. Of the 1,184-page ESEA, 17 pages set forth instructions for REAP's two new programs, one specifically for small and rural school districts, the other for high poverty rural districts. Appropriations passed by Congress in December 2001 fund REAP at $162.5 million.

Of the approximately 14,400 school districts in the U.S., more than 5,000 enroll fewer than 600 students each. These districts often do not have the personnel to write the grant proposals required for some federal programs, nor do the federal allocations they receive under other programs amount to enough to meet the purposes intended by Congress. Thus the two avenues most widely used to fund school districts are often blocked for a third of the nation's districts.

More than three years ago, rural superintendents belonging to the American Association of School Administrators sat down with staff members and outlined a rural education proposal. In response to then-President Clinton's "100,000 New Teachers" Initiative, this new proposal offered rural districts a funding alternative. Immediately, Congress saw the wisdom of the provision and the cosponsors of the Clinton bill championed the rural program from the beginning. Specifically,

Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Kent Conrad (D-ND), and Representatives Tom Osborne (R-NE) and Earl Pomeroy (D-ND), were leading voices in gathering momentum for the bill.

REAP includes the Small, Rural School Achievement Program (Subpart 1) and the Rural and Low-Income School Program (Subpart 2). School districts may participate in only one of the programs. Subpart 2 is a competitive grant program specifically for low-income rural school districts. Subpart 1 offers a new funding stream for districts with less than 600 students, located in rural communities. School districts in counties with fewer than 10 people per square mile are also eligible for this subpart, along with the designation of "rural."

Finding a definition for "rural" proved to be one of the biggest challenges in passing this bill in 2000. The federal government acknowledges it doesn't have a consistent system for categorizing what constitutes a rural school, district, or community. The U.S. Department of Education has developed "locale codes." Eligible districts are designated either 7 (rural, inside MSA) or 8 (rural, outside MSA) to participate in Subpart 1. The Secretary may allow exceptions if a district demonstrates that a state agency has classified it as "rural." (Visit http://nces.ed.gov/ccdweb/school/district.asp for locale codes.)

Forthcoming federal regulations will help districts calculate the funds they will receive. The estimate for subpart 1 is $20,000 to $60,000 per district, based on the number of students. Eligible activities include: teacher quality and preparation, curriculum for bilingual students, drug and alcohol awareness, after-school initiatives, and technology. Districts apply to either the U.S. or state departments of education.

Subpart 2 assists the few states where countywide districts are the norm. Eligible districts may request funds from the state department of education to increase student achievement.

Congress is to be applauded for reauthorizing and appropriating these rural education programs. Districts eligible for either program should contact their state education department and request materials, once available. The funds will be released July 1, 2002 for school year 2002-03.

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