

Differences in Rural and Urban Schools: Issues for Policymakers

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There is renewed interest in issues related to differences between rural and urban schools. How do public schools in rural areas differ from their suburban and urban counterparts? What special problems do rural schools face? What are the implications for educational policy-makers? What options might policymakers pursue to improve educational opportunities for rural youth? Can states design comprehensive funding plans that take into account the requirements not only of schools located in cities, but also the special needs and problems of rural schools?

Although policymakers sometimes like to think of rural versus urban differences in public schools, a better categorization might be the following:

1. *Schools located in and drawing students from medium-sized communities of 5,000 to 100,000 residents.* School systems in these communities would generally have enrollments exceeding 1,000 students and high school graduating classes exceeding 100 students;
2. *Suburban schools, perhaps ethnically diverse, but drawing students primarily from moderate to high-income sections of major cities.* These school systems would have enrollments of over 1,000 students and graduating classes exceeding 100 students;
3. *Schools located in major cities which draw a significant portion of their enrollment from low-income and ethnically-diverse families.* These school systems have enroll tens of thousands of students or more. High schools might have graduating classes exceeding 2,000 students; and

4. *Rural schools located in or near towns with populations of 5,000 residents or less.* For these schools, total enrollment in all grades seldom exceed 1,000 students, and graduating classes are usually under 100 students.

Schools in each of these categories share many common problems, but each category presents a unique set of problems for those responsible for policy decisions related to educational planning, funding and administration. Educational policymakers include state legislators, other elected officials at the state level, employees of state departments of public instruction, local school superintendents and other administrators, local school board members and other local leaders who influence educational decisions.

With the exception of Hawaii, which funds all public schools with state tax revenue, all states fund public schools with a mixture of state and local tax dollars. The mix of state and local funding varies considerably from state to state, even among states that are geographically close. In Kentucky, for example, more than 75 percent of the funding comes from state sources, whereas Ohio and Illinois schools obtain less than one-half of their funding from the state. States in the Southeast have moved toward a high proportion of state rather than local funding, while many Midwestern states continue to rely heavily on local taxes to fund schools. Federal tax dollars supplement state and local funds but generally are used to fund special programs mandated at the federal level, such as special education.

Each state develops its own formula to redistribute state tax revenue to local schools. These

formula are designed to correct funding imbalances that might otherwise occur if public schools had to rely solely on local taxes for funding. But these distribution formulae are products of elected officials, and political factors enter their construction. In most states, the metro population far exceeds the rural population, and therefore legislators representing metro areas, by virtue of their numbers, frequently have the most control over how distribution formulae are constructed.

Therefore, in most states, including many states with significant income from agriculture, school distribution formula are designed primarily to meet the needs of the schools in the larger cities. For example, the special funding problems of inner-city urban schools, for example, have been well documented. Additional costs include security and attendance personnel, and even salary supplements designed to encourage teachers to work in inner-city schools. In states with large urban centers, urban legislators have sometimes been successful in designing educational policy to meet the special needs of urban schools. However, in many states, the unique problems faced by rural schools that fall in the fourth category do not receive attention, and these problems are the subject of this article.

Funding and Control: Local versus State

Despite the increased emphasis in most states on educational policymaking and increased funding from state rather than local sources in many states, most public school systems retain the characteristics reflecting the socioeconomic makeup of the communities they serve. For most communities, this is not necessarily a problem. Local school board members and local administrators may be in a better position than state-level policymakers to determine the needed programmatic emphasis. Problems with local control over educational decision making arise when a sizable number of community residents undervalue investments in education. These values are expressed when parents do not place a high priority on their children's education, and perhaps tacitly or overtly encourage their children to drop out of school. This is not only a problem in rural schools. Problems of big-city

urban schools with regard to parental values on the need for education are similar to those found in families of many students in some rural schools in Kentucky and in other states in the Southeast. These problems are perhaps least severe in those public school systems in the first two categories.

Although there are many benefits of local control over the operation of school districts, there are advantages to a system that includes a mixture of state and local funding of local schools. Generally, the higher the proportion of state to local funding, the greater control state policymakers have over local public schools. State legislatures may mandate that local school districts do certain things such as state-imposed minimum curriculum requirements, minimum local property tax rates and minimum levies. In some rural areas of Kentucky and other states, without intervention and tax dollars from the state, local residents would be unwilling to tax farmland and other tangible forms of wealth at rates high enough to adequately support the public schools.

Public Schools are a Product of Their Communities

Past research has suggested that for most school systems (with the possible exception of those located in the inner cities of large urban areas), salaries and other characteristics of teachers closely mimic the socioeconomic characteristics of the community served by the school. The relationship between the income level of the community and the average salaries of the public school teachers has been found to be particularly strong. The higher the general income level of the community, the higher the average salaries. Low-income states tend to have low teachers salaries: high-income states tend to have high teachers salaries, with a few exceptions. Just as there is income variation from one rural community to another, so also will there be variation in teachers' salaries, even among school districts of similar enrollments. To the extent that a rural community is low-income, salaries of public school teachers will tend to be low as well.

Public schools often reflect other socio-economic characteristics of local residents. For example, research conducted in Indiana has also shown that schools with the highest percentage of teachers holding advanced degrees will be found in communities where the average educational level is highest. In general, there are few funding problems in rural schools serving students from families living in rural communities where the average educational level of parents is high. Public school teachers in these districts are likely to be well-paid and well-educated, at least when compared with districts where the average educational level is lower.

Teachers' Salaries and the 'Cost-of-Living'

It has sometimes been argued that teachers' salaries in rural communities should be lower than in schools located in other areas because the cost of living is lower in rural areas. Certainly, living costs vary from one section of the U.S. to another. J.B. Kohlmeyer once noted that it was not the high cost of living that caused teachers' salaries to be high in high-income areas, but rather the cost of high living. Most parents do not want public school teachers to live in poverty, but neither do parents want teachers to live in conditions better than what is considered the norm for the community. Community standards shape funding issues not only on local school boards, but within state legislatures as well. Clearly, what is considered the norm is higher in a high-income community than in a low-income community. Many parents in rural areas (and probably some legislators) appear to believe that materialism on the part of teachers is inappropriate--instead, teachers ought to be teaching for the "joy of teaching."

The federal government does not currently compile cost-of-living data for rural communities, although efforts are underway to begin such a program. Thus, observations about rural/urban cost-of-living differences are speculative and conjectural. Much of what the public believes are cost-of-living differences are probably observed differences in the cost of housing between rural and urban communities. However, it is not necessarily true that housing costs will always be lower in rural communities.

Furthermore, other costs may be higher in rural than in urban areas, including transportation costs, access to discount shopping malls, and food costs.

Although rural residents sometimes like to rationalize the lower salary levels for teachers on the basis of rural/urban cost-of-living differences, the real issue is "are salaries high enough to attract and retain top quality teachers?" In particular, are they high enough to attract top quality teachers into low-income rural areas, areas perhaps most in need of good teaching? When school distribution formulae are developed, there is often discussion of the need for "battle pay" to encourage top quality teachers to work in low-income, inner-city, urban schools. Perhaps similar efforts need to be directed toward designing funding mechanisms aimed at ensuring that top-quality teachers would be willing to work in low-income rural areas, particularly those areas that lack infrastructure and quality-of-life amenities. Unfortunately, salaries of school teachers in many rural areas often are not sufficient to attract the best teachers, but are rather set at the minimum needed to ensure that the school system can continue to remain open. Policymakers at the state level can play a vital role in ensuring that state support for rural schools, particularly in low-income rural areas, is sufficient to attract good teachers who are willing to work in low-income rural areas.

Public Schools in Rural Areas Experiencing Economic Decline

Rural communities that are losing jobs and people face a special set of problems. Frequently in these communities, public school enrollments are also declining. As a result, few new teachers need to be hired each year, and the average experience of teachers (but not necessarily the amount of formal education of teachers) may be high. With experienced teachers high on salary schedules, and declining pupil/teacher ratios, these declining-enrollment schools can have high per pupil expenditures. Loss of enrollment may also present problems with respect to the maintenance of a comprehensive set of course offerings at the secondary

level. Elementary school buildings may be designed to handle classes of certain size, but students are usually funded on a per pupil basis. If enrollment declines by, say, 10 percent, the "fixed" costs of having a teacher for each classroom and operating the facility may not be reduced, despite the fact that revenue coming from the state to the school system may be less than before.

Thus, declining enrollments, a particular problem for low-income rural districts, can lead to severe short-run problems for the public school administrator. Some states have attempted to lessen the financial impacts of declining enrollments by making adjustments to distribution formulae that take into account enrollment loss. In effect, what happens is that funding is based in part on enrollment in the recent past, rather than on current enrollment, to allow time for local school administration to adjust to the enrollment loss. These programs, sometimes called funding of "ghost" pupils, can be especially important to school systems located in declining rural areas.

Curricula in Rural Schools

One of the key differences between small rural schools and their suburban and urban counterparts is that the course offerings generally available at the secondary level are more limited for rural students. In general, the larger the enrollment, the more flexibility the local administrator will have in developing curricula consistent with the individualized needs of the students. Curricula in many rural schools often consist of the courses mandated by the state plus one or two additional offerings, such as vocational agriculture, home economics, or industrial education, designed to cater to student interests.

Much has been written about the rural-to-urban subsidization (spillover effects) that occurs as students who graduate from rural schools migrate to more heavily populated areas. Residents of rural communities subsidize larger communities by funding the elementary and secondary education of the rural-to-urban migrants. At the same time, however, curricula in schools located in many rural areas appear to

have been developed under the assumption that the majority of the graduating students will ultimately be able to find work in the local community. It might be nice to think of a utopian rural community in which the local public school system provides the majority of its students with precisely the skills that they will need in order to find good jobs at high wages within the local community. However, in most rural communities, this is not reality, nor is it an accurate assessment of what the future could hold for rural America. In many instances, secondary curricula in rural schools need to be revised to reflect the fact that most of the graduates will eventually leave to find employment away from the local community.

Transportation

Transportation of students also presents a special set of problems for many rural districts. Costs of transporting students are considerably higher in sparsely populated areas. A series of accidents involving school buses in Kentucky suggests that some school districts may have been attempting to save money by inadequately maintaining school buses and by not placing enough emphasis on school bus safety. It is not only the age and maintenance of school buses that should be of concern to rural residents, but also the level of funding needed to ensure that the roads over which students must travel are adequately maintained. Rural residents have a special stake in ensuring that the system of public highways is well maintained.

Optimal Funding for Public Schools in Rural Areas

Most states will continue to rely on a mixture of state and local funding for the support of public schools. A high proportion of state to local funding is particularly beneficial to rural districts in which local residents would be unable or unwilling to generate sufficient taxes to adequately support the local school system. It is as least as important for public schools students to have top quality teachers in low-income rural areas as it is in high-income suburban districts. School distribution formulae can be modified to encourage teachers to work in low income rural

areas, just as special efforts have been directed toward encouraging teachers to work in inner-city urban schools.

Particularly worrisome is that teachers' salaries in many states are now low enough that the brightest and best college students are choosing fields other than education, particularly fields where potential incomes are much higher. Witness the recent enrollment gains in fields such as programs such as accounting, marketing, finance, and computer science and the decline in education majors at many universities. Low-income rural areas potentially have the most to lose as the brightest college students elect fields other than education.

In the long run, funding for public schools from state and local sources:

1. must be sufficient to attract to the teaching profession individuals who have potential as top-quality teachers regardless of where the school system is located;
 2. should not place students at a disadvantage simply because they happen to reside in a community where some other students and many parents possess attitudes that discourage school attendance or do not see the value of educational investments;
 3. should address the special needs of rural schools that arise because of the sparsity of population including bussing costs and the costs of maintaining safe highways;
 4. must be sufficient to enable the local school district to develop curricular offerings at the secondary level that not only meet the immediate apparent needs of students but also the reality reflecting where these students will ultimately be employed; and
 5. should place special emphasis dealing with the financial difficulties associated with declining enrollments in rural communities experiencing decreases in birth rates and/or population losses due to out-migration.
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