

# Rural Brief

A Publication of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center at Edvantia

## Introduction

More than a quarter (28.6%) of schools in the United States are rural (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). More than 10 million rural students make up 20% of the total U.S. student population (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007a). In fact, student enrollment in rural communities with less than 2,500 residents has increased by 15% between 2002-03 and 2004-05 (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007a). The percent of rural schools in Appalachian states far exceeds the national percent, ranging from roughly 32% in Virginia to 45% in North Carolina.

**Kentucky**—42% of schools in KY are considered rural. The rural student population in KY is more than 250,000.

**North Carolina**—45% of all NC schools are rural. The state serves 615,000 rural students. NC ranks as the nation's second highest in terms of both the absolute number and percentage of rural student enrollment.

**Tennessee**—36.5% of all TN schools are rural, with a rural student population of more than 52,000. TN has the lowest per-pupil expenditure figure in the nation, yet it serves the ninth largest rural student population.

**Virginia**—31.8% of schools in VA are defined as rural. The rural student population in VA is nearly 328,000. Nearly a quarter of all students in VA attend rural schools.

**West Virginia**—40.6% of WV schools are rural. The rural student population in WV is 122,000. WV has the lowest rural income of any state, with more than half of all students qualifying for subsidized school meals.

Rural schools share some characteristics. By virtue of being rural, many schools are remotely located in places of sparse population. Rural schools may also face resource constraints because of depressed local tax bases, declining infrastructures, and Title I formula allocations, which give priority to the number rather than the percentage of low-income students. A history of local control also makes some rural schools resistant to state or federal initiatives.

But rural schools are also diverse. Reflecting their community preferences, some rely on traditional instructional practices, while others are sources of more progressive practice. Whereas some rural schools are community centers, others are large consolidated sites. Rural schools also reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of the communities they serve.



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Although rural schools face plenty of challenges, they also have many of the characteristics critics of public education advocate for—meaningful family engagement, community support, and close-knit relationships (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). In addition, many of the practices that are considered to be innovative originated by necessity in rural schools. These include multigrade classrooms, looping, small learning communities, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary studies, peer tutoring, block scheduling, and using the community as the focus of study (NEA, 2008). Finally, rural student achievement is as strong as nonrural achievement (Provasnik et al., 2007).

## Rural NCLB Implementation

Because of their particular context, rural schools face issues with the implementation of NCLB that differ in many ways from those faced by their nonrural counterparts.

### Meeting Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) Requirements

Rural teachers face difficulty meeting NCLB's requirement that teachers be highly qualified. Because rural schools lack economies of scale regarding subject area specialization, rural teachers must often teach multiple subjects, even if they are not highly qualified in each. And because of rural remoteness, such teachers may lack access to the professional development and educational opportunities that would enable them to become highly qualified. In addition, teacher shortages are especially severe in high-poverty rural areas, making it even more challenging to find highly qualified teachers.

Current "rural flexibility" provisions give some rural teachers more time to reach the status of highly qualified. But these provisions apply only to teachers in districts qualifying for the U.S. Department of Education's Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program. To qualify, a school district must either serve fewer than 600 students or be located in a county with fewer than 10 people per square mile. Also, all schools in the district must be located in communities with fewer than 2,500 residents. According to the Rural School and Community Trust (2004a), only 26% of rural districts fit this description, many of which are disproportionately located in the Great Plains and Midwest. As a result, teachers in the many large or county-wide districts in the Appalachian region do not receive the benefits of "rural flexibility."

#### *What states can do*

- Fund regional professional development consortia dedicated to helping rural teachers achieve highly qualified status.
- Offer incentives and support to institutions of higher education that find creative ways to offer subject matter courses to

rural teachers seeking highly qualified status.

- Optimize existing professional development and education opportunities by using communications technologies.

### Recruitment/Retention

Lower pay, geographic and social isolation, and difficult working conditions (such as teaching multiple subjects) can make attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools and districts challenging (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005; Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006). Rural schools also report teacher shortages in special education and middle and secondary mathematics, science, and foreign languages (Schwartzbeck, Prince, Redfield, Morris, & Hammer, 2003). Proximity to higher-paying districts makes recruitment and retention difficult for some rural districts (Hammer et al., 2005).

#### *What states can do*

- Implement "grow-your-own" teacher development initiatives in partnership with schools and institutions of higher education, focusing on producing teachers for high-need subject areas.
- Offer incentives to help paraprofessionals already working in rural schools to participate in "grow-your-own" or other teacher development programs.
- Bundle strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers in high-need subject areas in rural schools, including a statewide clearinghouse for job announcements and candidate applications, formalized induction or mentoring programs, marketing the advantages of living and teaching in rural communities, and ensuring that school staff are involved in the hiring process so that candidates may interact with future coworkers.
- Help rural schools and districts fund financial incentives to encourage recruitment and retention, including hiring bonuses, tying bonuses for teachers remaining past the first year, loan forgiveness programs, and housing assistance.

### Resources

Many rural schools, particularly those in the Appalachian region, serve high-poverty communities. Poverty remains a persistent threat to equitable educational opportunities and student achievement. Yet many states serving the poorest rural student populations tend also to have some of the lowest per-pupil expenditures.

In addition, federal Title I weighted grants distribute funds to districts with large concentrations of impoverished students, but do so in a way that disadvantages rural districts (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007b). A provision in the Targeted Grant Program and the Educational Finance Incentive Grant Program weights the student count used to

determine a district's share of Title I funds. Districts may elect to use either the percentage of students or the absolute number of students who are Title I eligible. Larger, nonrural districts often elect to use number weighting rather than percentage weighting because they can receive a higher weight by relying on their large numbers of students. But as a result, small rural districts receive a far smaller share of Title I funds, even if they serve larger percentages of impoverished students.

#### *What states can do*

- Help rural schools and districts to form cooperatives with other nearby rural schools and districts to pool resources.
- Build the capacity of rural schools and districts to develop winning grant proposals by providing technical assistance and professional development.
- If possible, give rural districts the flexibility to establish four-day school weeks.
- Help small rural schools save resources by implementing multigrade classrooms.

### **Increasing Language Diversity**

Rural communities are increasingly diverse. The rural English Language Learner (ELL) population has increased by 50% during the past 8 years (Rural School and Community Trust, 2007a). Many rural districts and schools struggle to develop ELL programming for which they formerly had no need. Their struggle is compounded by teacher shortages: More than 40% of rural districts report that they have vacancies and/or difficulty recruiting ELL teachers (Provasnik et. al., 2007). Remote schools often cannot share ELL teachers or resources with other schools because they are far flung, nor can they access ELL professional development because there are no institutions of higher education or other resources nearby. Moreover, rural schools serving larger ELL populations tend also to serve larger populations of low-income students.

#### *What states can do*

- Help rural schools or districts form cooperatives with nearby sites to share ELL teachers, if remote distance is not a concern.
- Provide information about existing ELL programs for rural schools and districts to consider.
- Let rural educators know about organizations that can help them find solutions, such as the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) and Language Instruction Educational Programs.

### **Access to Higher Level Courses**

Access to higher level coursework, including Advanced Placement (AP), is another persistent rural issue. Despite the enhanced educational outcomes associated with AP participation (Geiser & Santelices, 2004), rural schools are less likely to offer AP courses than their nonrural counterparts. Only 52% of rural schools offer such access, compared to 72% in towns, 78% in cities, and 85% in suburban areas (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 90).

#### *What states can do*

- Subsidize some of the costs associated with AP and/or International Baccalaureate programs for rural schools and districts. Such costs could include the initial application fee, grants for student test fees, and additional funding appropriations for AP and IB texts.
- Offer incentives to institutions of higher education that find ways to provide dual credit courses to rural high school students.
- Coordinate efforts with the state's AP Incentive Program, if one exists.

### **Conclusion**

Rural schools bring many strengths to their efforts. But they also face unique challenges. Fortunately, state departments of education and their partners can offer much in the way of support to rural schools and districts. Helping districts form cooperatives, supporting innovation, and leveraging communication technologies are just a few such strategies.

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