

# Recent Education Trends and Their Hypothesized Impact on Rural Districts

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*A number of developments in education that originated during the past 5 years or became more pronounced during this time are of great significance for the nation's rural school systems. I agree that most of these developments have the potential for enhancing the institutional capacity of rural districts to respond to the growing pressures on public education.*

## Introduction

The three preceding articles stressed the importance of socioeconomic, demographic, and political trends of approximately the past 5 years, and then addressed the implications these developments might have for rural education in this nation. A consideration of the external environment within which rural education functions is, of course, necessary if one is to understand rural school districts today. Though debate continues regarding how best to assess an educational enterprise (e.g., through political models), few disagree that external conditions must be analyzed if an assessment is to have merit.

As important as it is to consider external contexts, the need remains to examine developments taking place *within* the field of education. This is so because while most education trends originate in larger societal contexts, the form these trends take in the field of education is also affected by the norms and traditions of the field itself. A schematic illustrating one preferred way to view the relationship between external considerations and education in a rural setting is provided in Figure 1.

The recent period of elementary and secondary education in this nation has been one of the most active in modern times; consequently, the pool of developments is very large. Yet not all of these developments represent sea changes in the field—or even lesser waves—but rather are likely to be viewed in the future as merely ripples that have come and gone with the night. It is necessary, then, to identify which developments will be of significance for rural school systems.

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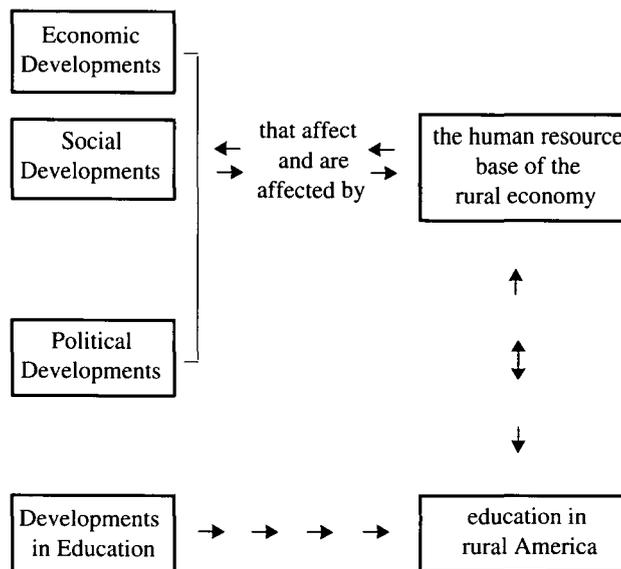


Figure 1. Thinking About the Implications of Recent Developments for Rural Education.

## Selection Criteria Used

Identifying which of the large number of recent developments that should be viewed as a sea change, or at least a tidal wave, is difficult and likely to be controversial. To isolate those developments that influence the direction of both policy and practice in the nation's schools—urban, suburban, and rural alike—I will employ two selection criteria. First, a development must have an extraordinary impact on an educational institution's governance and its instructional, staffing, student, financial, and community support subsystems. These comprise the most critical measures of the institutional capacity of the organization. Second, a development must be institutionalized by legislative action at the federal level or by a significant number of

state legislatures; be the result of judicial action by a significant number of state courts; or be endorsed by an influential, high-visibility stakeholder group.

A number of developments in their early stages fail to satisfy both criteria, but they may yet prove of great consequence for one or more of the major segments of education. For example, substantial support is building for the concept of the "rural school as the community learning center," a movement that has considerable potential for favorably impacting the institutional capacity of a rural district. The concept at this point, however, has not yet been institutionalized by legislative or judicial action, nor does it enjoy endorsement by a major stakeholder group.

While the use of both selection criteria precludes consideration of a number of recent developments, this approach minimizes the subjectivity inherent in the two-step method followed here: the identification of major developments in the field, followed by an assessment of what these are likely to mean for rural education.

#### Recent Significant Developments

Fourteen recent developments in the field satisfy the two selection criteria (see Table 1). A development or trend may have occurred during a specific year on the 5-year continuum, 1989-1993 (e.g., the formal adoption of the six national education goals in 1990). In most cases, however, the trends under consideration here predate the 5-year period, but became more discernible during that

Table 1  
*Major Developments in Education, 1989-1993*

1.	profound shift in locus of control for policy development
2.	reaffirmation of national interest in education
3.	new, more rigorous accountability
4.	redirection of school reform movement
5.	new interest in restructuring governance
6.	renewed interest in collaboration
7.	accelerated support for parental choice options
8.	growing support for the privatization of education
9.	renewed ferment in state school finance
10.	beginnings of a national education technology policy
11.	growing diversity in school-age population
12.	new interest in geographic diversity in public schools
13.	major advances in policy analysis tools
14.	unrest with instructional practices

time. Importantly, the vigor of both the new and the continuing developments shows no sign of abating.

Several of the 14 trends are clearly related, while others are largely independent movements. Related trends were not collapsed into one category because they are judged to be major movements in and of themselves, and it will be useful to examine them separately.

A brief profile of the 14 trends follows. A substantial body of literature is accumulating on many, and it is not possible to even begin to review this literature here. Instead, a sketch of each development is provided to chart its main direction. Also established, where appropriate, are the precipitating actions giving rise to the development (e.g., benchmark legislative trends or court decisions, and/or advocacy by one or more influential stakeholders).

#### 1. *Profound Shift in Policy Making*

*Locus of control for education policy has shifted from traditional sources to new players.* One of the most significant recent changes in education is the unmistakable shift in the locus of control for education policymaking, a conclusion shared by most students of school government. The influence has dissipated of what Timar (1989) terms "the old iron triangle" (p. 275)—the schools of education, state departments of education, and NEA affiliates that dominated education policy up until the mid-1960s, especially at the state level. At the federal level, even Guthrie and Reed's (1991) depiction of the iron triangle consisting of the education agencies of the executive branch, Congressional committees, and interest groups seems limited now. Spring's (1993, p. 3) more recent characterization of "the big three" education interest groups consisting of foundations, teachers' unions, and the corporate sector is useful, but does not seem to capture the unfolding shift in power.

Certainly the role of the "old" and the "new" iron triangles and "the big three" remains important in understanding the formulation of education policy. It is also clear, however, that new players have appeared, and that they have the will to utilize their authority and resources. Without question, for example, the deep involvement of the nation's governors in framing the six national education goals in 1989 represents a major shift. This action is even more significant because it was taken in collaboration with the sitting President of the United States, thus forming an unprecedented, powerful, virtually unstoppable, new coalition. The product of this coalition has been the centerpiece of education policy in virtually all states in the ensuing years, and has shaped the federal role in education as well. Nor should one exclude the recent activities of state judicial systems. Though the courts have always exerted influence over educational matters, recent judicial decisions rendered in a number of states remind us that the

judicial system is again being asked to impose its views, and it does not appear unwilling to do so when motivated by some perceived, compelling reason. The recent proliferation of interest groups in education has further diluted the influence of many of the traditional players. Finally, the relatively recent emphasis on education by the national news media has also exerted increasing influence on the education debate in this nation. In a recent essay commenting on the difficulties leaders in a democratic society face in formulating agendas, the columnist David Broder (1994) argues that the legitimate organs of government—political parties, the executive and legislative branches—have lost power, and that this lost power has flowed to interest groups and the press. Concerning the role of the press, Broder (1994, p. 2) claims that “willy-nilly, much of the agenda-setting that was done by political parties and elected officials in times past has drifted into the hands of news organizations . . . [which are] . . . ill-equipped for the job.”

## 2. *Reaffirmation of National Interest in Education*

*A new national interest in education is taking shape.*

The joint adoption in 1989 of the six national education goals by the nation's governors and President Bush would undoubtedly be on everyone's short list of major happenings in education during the past 5 years and, perhaps, during the entire century as well. The now familiar six national goals specify that all children should come to school ready to learn (goal 1); high school graduation rates must increase (goal 2); all students must demonstrate competency in English, mathematics, science, history, geography, and citizenship (goal 3); students should be first in the world in science and math achievement (goal 4); illiteracy should be eradicated (goal 5); and schools should be safe and drug-free (goal 6).

Though concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of the goals statement, the nation's governors and the Bush administration were not deterred (in a rare expression of bi-partisan support). Most states soon adopted the six goals, with some states complementing these with more specific goals of their own. At the federal level, the Bush administration released AMERICA 2000: An Education Strategy (Department of Education, 1991), its plan to promote progress toward the six goals. Importantly, the six national education goals, along with other features of the AMERICA 2000 strategy discussed below, would soon be further institutionalized as federal policy. The goals are included in the Clinton administration's major education proposal, Goals 2000: Educate America Act (H.R. 1804 and S. 1150), as well as in the pending amendments to the massive Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1993 (H.R. 3130 and S. 1131).

Historically, the federal role in education has centered on the protection of civil rights and the training that is

deemed necessary for the national welfare (Valente, 1994) or, alternatively, has centered on the enhancement of educational productivity, the equalization of educational opportunity, and the enhancement of liberty (Guthrie & Reed, 1991). Should the six goals be retained in both proposals as expected, they would represent a fundamental expansion of the traditional federal interest in education.

## 3. *New, More Rigorous Accountability Systems*

*Schools face new, more rigorous accountability.* Support for more rigorous accountability systems has grown substantially in recent years, and much progress has been achieved by groups advocating this policy goal. The past 5 years have witnessed, in rapid succession, the following major developments. First, as cited earlier, is the formal acceptance of the largely measurable six national education goals by the National Governors' Association in 1990 and the subsequent adoption in 1991 of these as federal policy by the Department of Education. In 1990, the National Education Goals Panel, comprising six governors and four members of both the administration and Congress, was created to measure progress toward the six goals, and it issued its first annual report the following year (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). The Panel subsequently launched efforts to resolve questions surrounding the most meaningful indicators for tracking progress and for resolving other measurement issues inherent in a large-scale effort of this type.

In 1991, Congress created the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), which was charged with two major responsibilities: (a) advise on the desirability and feasibility of national standards and tests and (b) recommend long-term policies, structures, and mechanisms for setting voluntary education standards and planning an appropriate system of tests (NCEST, 1992). In its 1992 report, NCEST argued that high national content standards must be aligned with assessment, that school performance standards should be established, and that states should establish school delivery standards to provide evidence that students have an opportunity to learn the higher content standards.

The Council's work was well received by Congress, for in the following year both the proposed House version (H.R. 3130) and the Senate version (S. 1131) of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1993 (the proposed amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) contained provisions for voluntary national content standards, voluntary student performance standards, voluntary state assessment program standards, and voluntary opportunity-to-learn standards (the new, substitute language for school delivery standards). The Clinton administration's major education proposal, Goals 2000: Education America Act (H.R. 1804 and S. 1150), contains

similar provisions. This proposal would also add the arts, languages, civics, and government to the content areas where students must demonstrate competency, as well as add a seventh goal: teacher access to staff development programs.

Congress's relatively aggressive response to NCEST's call for greater accountability in part reflects strong support within important political circles for more rigorous standards and assessment programs. For example, the Education Commission of the States, long an advocate of greater accountability, argues that more rigorous standards and assessments are an essential part of its eight "policy components that provide high leverage for changing K-12 education" (Education Commission of the States, 1992, p. 1). The equally influential National Governors' Association Task Force on Education, also a strong advocate of greater accountability, again emphasized the need for both high standards and meaningful assessments in its recent position paper on opportunity-to-learn standards (National Governors' Association Task Force on Education, 1992-93).

A growing number of states have also initiated strategies for placing poorly performing schools, not just school districts, in receivership. This practice, though rarely exercised, represents a major new chapter in the accountability movement. It follows several recent, high-visibility cases where the courts have assumed judicial oversight of a public school district.

#### 4. *Redirection of School Reform*

*The focus of the school reform movement has shifted.* This country has passed through several well-documented phases in its now decade-long experience to reform American education. In the first wave of reform, the emphasis was clearly on the use of state mandates to effect change in the areas stressed in *A Nation At Risk* (e.g., increased graduation requirements, statewide assessments, added instructional time, competency tests for teacher certification, merit pay). State mandates were supplanted as a focal point by the "restructuring" movement, which especially was championed in the early work of Boyer (1983), Goodlad (1984), and Sizer (1984), who argued that long-term change will occur only when individual schools and their faculties are given substantial autonomy to establish both priorities and the means to achieve them.

The influence of such writers was profound and soon resulted in a number of initiatives that continue to receive support. One of the more visible examples is the use of site-based management in many school systems, which is encouraged in many states and mandated in several others.

More recently, "systemic reform" became the preferred term for characterizing the reform movement. This substitution is due in part to the loose way *restructuring*

came to be defined and used, leading Elmore (1990) to observe that "school restructuring has many of the characteristics of what political and organizational theorists call a 'garbage can'" (p. 4).

But this is not a mere change in semantics. Clune (1991) is one who argues that "the idea behind systemic educational policy is that the current policy goal of substantial increases in student achievement will require a major shift in a large number of educational policies" (p. 3). The focus on moving the entire system of education to higher levels of excellence, of concentrating on the whole instead of the parts, is the central thesis of systemic reform advocates. Smith and O'Day's (1990) conceptualization of the construct is especially insightful, as is Fuhrman and Massell (1992). Both of these works stress the integration of a strong state-level leadership role with local school district flexibility to achieve long-term school improvement.

One of the best ways to illustrate the redirection of the school reform movement toward systemic reform is through the previously-cited statement by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). ECS found that states will

move toward systemic reform from one or two key policy areas and then, over time, keep linking new policy initiatives to those "foundation" areas. No one philosophy about which area has to drive the others is correct. (ECS, 1992, p. 1)

ECS argues that eight policy areas provide high leverage for achieving systemic reform. These eight, then, comprise ECS's conceptualization of systemic reform. The first two concern content standards, assessment, and accountability, as previously noted. The remaining six policy areas are:

1. governance (e.g., mandate or encourage site-based management or collaborative decision making, put state and district services in the hands of school councils, restructure the state education agency)
2. professional development (e.g., align professional development with standards, regulate the training and licensing of teachers, increase initial and continuing certification requirements, require professional development schools, encourage K-12 and university partnerships)
3. higher education (e.g., engage higher education in reform, form K-12 and university collaboratives)
4. finance (e.g., redesign formulas to focus on excellence as well as equity, expand defini-

- tion of equity to include outcomes and opportunities, shift more budget authority to schools)
5. cross-agency collaboration (e.g., provide incentives for health, social, and youth-serving agencies and schools to collaborate, increase family involvement in schools)
  6. diversity/options (e.g., create and support alternative forms of learning and teaching, create more public school choices for parents, create more magnet schools, create "tech-prep" programs). (ECS, 1992, pp. 1-2)

This more complete description of ECS's central positions is provided because they are likely to be highly visible as the systemic change movement evolves. Indeed, several of ECS's 1992 recommendations already enjoy widespread support and implementation.

#### 5. *New Interest in Restructuring Educational Governance*

*There is a new interest in the redesign of school governance.* The governance of elementary and secondary education has not escaped scrutiny during the past 5 years; some aspects of school governance have been objects of long-standing concern (e.g., the utility of the local control concept, the value of school boards, the bureaucratization of schools). Different motives, some of them contradictory, appear to be driving calls for restructuring the governance of education.

Of the different calls for change in patterns of decision-making, three are of special significance. One call is manifested in the site-based management proposals that grant substantial autonomy to individual school faculties and community councils to make important programming and staffing decisions based on their particular needs. The second call is the more ambitious, charter school movement, which in principle allows certified teachers to establish an independent public school by entering a contract or charter with a local school district board of education. According to Saulter (1993), over 15 states have either passed legislation promoting charter schools (e.g., Minnesota, Colorado, Georgia, New Mexico) or are giving serious attention to the concept.

The third call for a reconfigured governance structure has been expressed through a flurry of proposals to strengthen the effectiveness of boards of education. These proposals would change the basic legal authority or composition of boards of education in conformity with the following demands by the Task Force Report on School Governance (Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992): (a) reconstitute boards as local education policy boards and (b) establish coordinated boards that will be responsible for developing services for children and youth.

#### 6. *Extraordinary Interest in Collaboration*

*New forms of collaboration are being promoted.* For several decades, many states have encouraged collaboration among local school districts. Perhaps the most visible example of this policy is the proliferation of education service agency-type organizations in the last half of the 1960s and into the 1970s (Stephens, 1979). However, nothing in the past compares with the recent, extraordinary commitment to engage elementary and secondary education in the new, much broader forms of collaboration. In addition to renewed interest in forming educational collaboratives among local districts, there has also been a new commitment to create partnerships between post-secondary institutions and local school districts. Many such partnerships have been launched, and the previously cited ECS call to enlist post-secondary institutions in the school reform movement is likely to result in more collaborations of this type.

While these examples of interest in collaboration are important, they pale in comparison to the extraordinary recent interest in new, much broader forms of collaboration—the call for greater cooperation and collaboration, and, in some circles, integration of education with other child- and youth-serving agencies. Such collaboration has recently been endorsed in principle by many of the groups that significantly influence education policy in this nation (e.g., the National Governors' Association, the Council of Chief of State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Education Commission of the States). Moreover, the concept has been institutionalized in one form or another as state policy in a growing number of states, with developments in Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin among the first to provide both mandates and fiscal incentives to achieve collaboration at the local and state levels.

The concept of greater collaboration between education and other service providers is taking on still another twist in rural regions, where there is increasing support for the rural school as the community service center. While few examples are presently in place (Bhaerman, 1994), the concept is likely to receive increased attention, because it is now being linked to the concept of the rural school as the community learning as well as service center. This expanded role is likely to appeal to those who believe the education infrastructure must be strengthened as a necessary step in any meaningful national, state, and local rural economic development effort.

#### 7. *Accelerated Support for Parental Choice Options*

*Encouragement of parental choice options is widespread.* Support for parental choice options gained momentum during the past five years, spurred by the Bush

Administration (Goals 2000: An Education Strategy) and most major interest groups (e.g., the National Governors' Association, the Education Commission of the States), and fueled by the widely-discussed, controversial work of Chubb and Moe in 1990.

Public school choice options, of either the intra-district or inter-district variety, now appear to have the support of both the public and many state legislatures. Between 1989-1993, support also grew for charter schools, another movement advocated, in part, by some who envision them as a strategy for promoting parental choice.

The use of vouchers for private schooling, still another variation of choice, promises to remain an issue for some time, despite the recent experience in California, where this option was defeated in a special statewide election in the fall of 1993. According to Harrington-Lueker (1993), Americans for School Choice plans to launch voucher proposals in 25 additional states by 1996.

#### 8. *Growing Support for Privatization of Public Education*

*There is greater acceptance of the privatization of public education.* Impetus for this movement undoubtedly stems in part from the Bush administration's emphasis on creating 535 "New America Schools" (Department of Education, 1991). A few districts have recently entered into contracts with private firms for educational services (e.g., Baltimore, MD), and privatization is under consideration in others. The Maryland State Board of Education, for example, recently enacted a by-law enabling it to contract with the private sector to administer poorly performing schools, and the Minneapolis Board of Education recently decided to contract with a private firm for the services of a chief executive officer for the district.

Whether the privatization movement extends beyond contracting for services remains to be seen. Calls for breaking up a perceived public school monopoly appear to have lessened in recent years, but they have not disappeared. Moreover, the privatization of other public services is clearly gaining momentum, most recently in the Clinton administration's call for "reinventing government." If the advocates of choice and the advocates of school governance restructuring come to view privatization as a logical extension of their proposals, and if these apparently disparate forces join together, then it is likely that the privatization of public education will be central to future developments in the field.

#### 9. *Renewed Ferment in State School Finance*

*State school finance programs are again being challenged.* Certainly the 1989 Kentucky Supreme Court case (*Rose v. Council*, 1989) declaring the entire state school system unconstitutional should be viewed as a major re-

cent event in the field. At its inception, the case was a challenge to state funding formulas, and such challenges were not uncommon during the preceding two decades: Funding formulas in over half of the states were similarly called into question (Franklin & Hickrod, 1990). The Kentucky case, however, is generally viewed as a benchmark case for two reasons. First, rather than attempt to effect modifications in the existing state funding formula, the court instead declared the entire state system of elementary and secondary education in violation of the equal protection clause. Second, in arriving at this conclusion, the court imposed the adequacy criterion as an additional test of whether or not the state met its constitutional responsibility to provide for an efficient system of common schools. Earlier court cases in other states have employed the adequacy criterion, among which West Virginia's *Pauley v. Bailey* (1979) is a notable example. The slow implementation of the decision in West Virginia probably diminished its significance, and it is only since 1989 that another round of litigation has swept the country, no doubt greatly influenced by the case in Kentucky.

#### 10. *Beginnings of a National Education Technology Policy*

*A national education technology policy is taking shape.* Less than 10 years ago, Cleveland (1985) observed that the rapid pace of development in information technologies and the subsequent "passing of remoteness" should be regarded as "one of the great unheralded macrotrends of our extraordinary time" (p. 195). In the ensuing years, the information superhighway arrived, which has the potential for improving teaching and learning as well as addressing equity issues in the nation's schools. Of special significance for education, then, is the creation of a national technical policy for educational technology. Title III of the proposal amendments of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Improving America's Schools Act of 1993—H.R. 3130 and S. 1131) mandates the establishment of an Office of Educational Technology, and it charges the Secretary of Education to develop a cohesive, long-range national plan to ensure the use of technology to promote achievement of the national education goals (H.R. 3130, p. 150). This pending action by Congress is an important step in ensuring the development of federal and state strategies commensurate with the technological breakthroughs that take place almost daily.

#### 11. *Growing Diversity in School-Age Population*

*The great diversity of the school-age population is more apparent.* That this country has long been one of the most racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse societies in the world is widely accepted. This diversity was further fueled in the 1980s by a near-record rate of immigration,

largely from Asia and the western hemisphere. While the total population increased roughly 10% from 1980 to 1990, the White population increased only 6%. The percentage increases of the other four major racial and ethnic groups, on the other hand, were substantially greater: Black, 13%; Native American, 38%; Hispanic, 53%; and Asian or Pacific Islander, 108% (Hodgkinson, 1992).

Changes in the racial and ethnic makeup of the population, of course, ultimately are reflected in the school-age population. A recent Congressional briefing report provides a useful summary of changes in the composition of the elementary and secondary school enrollment:

Between 1980 and 1990, the white school-age population declined by more than 4 million children or about 12%, and the number of school-age, black children decreased by about 250,000 or about 4%. In contrast, the number of Hispanic school-age children rose by 1.25 million, or 57%, and the number of Asian children grew by over 600,000—an 87% increase. By 1990, white children composed less than 70% of the total school-age population, down from about 75% in 1980. (General Accounting Office [GAC], 1993, pp. 4-5)

In the 1980s, the majority of students in the nation's central city school systems were black or Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), prompting Weisberger (1994) to observe that in urban areas "the terms nonwhite and minority are no longer synonymous" (p. 19).

Racial and ethnic composition is but one aspect of the growing diversity in the school-age population. Pronounced differences in the socioeconomic status of children and youth is another important dimension. The GAC report also summarizes levels of poverty in this nation's school-age population:

During the 1980s, the number of poor, school-age children grew by 6%—from about 7.2 million to 7.6 million. The national poverty rate for school age children increased from 15.3% to 17.1%. Like the total school age population, poor children became more racially and ethnically diverse. . . . White children made up about a third of the urban, school-age poverty population but over two-thirds of all rural poor children. Regardless of region, black children experienced the highest rates of school-age poverty. The poverty rate for black children ranged from 34% in all urban areas to almost 41% in rural areas. Except for Asian children, rural children of each race and ethnic group had the highest poverty rates. (GAC, 1993, pp. 5-6)

The deteriorating condition of children and youth in this nation has been profiled frequently, as have the underlying causes and educational consequences for this relatively recent phenomenon in the history of this nation. Surely the growing diversity in the school-age population sketched here would be included in most short lists of major recent developments in the field of education.

## 12. *New Interest in Geographic Diversity in Public Schools*

*A parallel need to accommodate the geographic diversity in the public school universe has also been recognized.* For several decades, the difficulties confronting large urban school systems have been the subject of a number of influential pieces that have captured the nation's attention. The seminal works of Wise (1967) and Kozol (1991) stand out as the two bookends of a rich literature produced over the past quarter century calling attention to the plight of urban systems. The federal and state governments have responded with the passage of a long list of fiscal measures and programmatic initiatives designed to address urban education issues.

Awareness of the unique characteristics of the nation's rural school systems has also been the subject of a growing body of literature, in which Sher's (1977) and Nachtigal's (1982) collections are the most influential. Particularly during the 1980s, congressional interests began to insist on rural set-asides in several of the big-ticket federal programs, and have been responsible for launching a number of specially-targeted rural education initiatives as well (Stephens, 1992a). Similarly, many state governments have for years recognized the uniqueness of rural systems by supporting special fiscal and programmatic initiatives (Stephens, 1992b).

A number of the major national professional associations have established a special rural task force or rural caucus as well as recognized their rural constituency through special programs. Most of these initiatives are of relatively recent origin and are intended to parallel special urban or special suburban membership activities of longer standing. At the state level, rural education interests are increasingly establishing their own separately organized state groups to promote rural education. Though many reasons account for this recent development, one of the principal rationales is that the needs of rural, urban, and suburban schools are so diverse that reaching consensus within the established umbrella of state interest groups is too difficult (Stephens & Haughey, 1993).

## 13. *Major Advances in Analytical Tools and Techniques*

*Major advances were made during the past 5 years in policy analysis tools and techniques.* Rural interests have

perhaps been the loudest critics of both the federal and state governments, which despite some notable exceptions, continue to treat public education as a monolithic enterprise. In 1989, however, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the Johnson Code (Johnson, 1989), which classifies each of the nation's schools into one of seven locale categories (large city, mid-size city, urban fringe of large city, urban fringe of mid-size city, large town, small town, and rural). In cooperation with the U.S. Census Bureau, NCES also completed work in 1993 on the School District Data Book (SDDB). This resource will provide a selected socioeconomic and demographic profile of every public school system in the nation. Moreover, the SDDB can be merged with school districts' financial, enrollment, and staffing data that are a part of NCES's increasingly sophisticated data bases (Herriot, 1992).

These two efforts alone make possible the resolution of many of the technical issues complicating approaches to diversity. The ability to establish the uniqueness or sameness of the nation's approximately 15,000 school systems and over 80,000 schools is now greatly facilitated by a new pool of contextual, input, and process indicators.

But there is more, especially for rural interests. In the 1980s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service developed two classifications of nonmetropolitan counties. The first classifies all of the approximately 2,400 nonmetropolitan counties according to their primary economic activity (e.g., agricultural-related, mining-related, persistent poverty; Bender et al., 1985). The second classifies nonmetropolitan counties according to their size of population and proximity to a metropolitan county (Butler, 1990).

Among other benefits, these classification systems make it possible to address the concern that the use of a common rural district definition would obscure the diversity of these types of systems. A reasonable solution to the rural school definition issue would seem attainable.

These four projects provide the analytical capacity necessary to address the diversity issues that have long hampered the development of equitable, adequate, responsive, and appropriate federal and state education policy. That they will contribute to raising the quality of public policy debates concerning the diverse condition of education across this nation seems indisputable.

#### 14. *Unrest on the Instructional Front*

*Public dissatisfaction with instructional practices is growing.* It is clear that at the end of 1993, many instructional programming features of the nation's elementary and secondary schools differ substantially from those existing 5 years ago. Progress is well underway, for example, to develop standards in the five content areas established

in goal 3 of the national education goals and in other curricular areas that advocacy groups want to incorporate in goal 3. Goal 3 has already substantially re-ordered the instructional programming priorities and practices in elementary and secondary education at the state and local levels. The anticipated passage in early 1994 of Goals 2000: Educate America Act will further shape instructional programming priorities and practices by institutionalizing the content goals as national policy and, further, by establishing voluntary national student performance standards aligned with the content standards.

Other issues related to the instructional features of schools have also become sources of much activity—and, frequently, of heated debate. Five of particular importance are cited here:

1. the renewed emphasis on at-risk students has prompted debates concerning ability grouping, graded classes in the early grades, remedial/compensatory programs
2. the renewed controversy between assimilationists and accommodationists concerning the role of schools in addressing the increasing diversity of the school-age population
3. the Christian Fundamentalist Movement's challenges to the reforms supported by many in the education profession (e.g., outcome-based education), which the movement views as in conflict with parental and community values
4. the strong support in the business community for a greater emphasis on vocational/technical programs
5. the growing opposition to the full inclusion movement, apparently spearheaded by the major national education professional associations.

#### Hypothesized Impact of Developments on Rural School Districts

What are the likely consequences of these 14 major education developments for the nation's rural school systems? Will they generally be supportive, or do they represent additional threats to the viability of systems of this type? The following profile focuses on the impact of the educational trends on the institutional capacity of rural school systems. Various definitions of the term *institutional capacity* are in use, primarily because there are presently multiple ways to conceptualize the organizational and process characteristics of an educational entity. For the present purpose, the construct will include the six critical subsystems that embrace most of the critical indicators of the health and performance of an educational

organization: governance, instructional, staffing, student, financial, and community support subsystems.

I classified the hypothesized impact of the 14 education developments as either "positive," "negative," or "unclear" relative to the six critical subsystems of rural school districts. Further, I classified the strength of both positive and negative impacts: "major" (five or six of the subsystems are likely to be impacted); "moderate" (three or four subsystems are); and "minor" (one or two are). The results of this impact scale are shown in Table 2.

Several general observations seem warranted. A substantial majority of the education developments of the past 5 years are potentially beneficial for rural education interests. That is, together they represent progress toward addressing both long-term conditions handicapping the institutional capacity of many rural systems and, in addition, promise to assist rural districts as they attempt to respond to the rising expectations of public education. This overall favorable assessment is based, in large part, on the judgment that 5 of the 14 developments could have major positive consequences for many rural systems; an additional three trends are also likely to enhance the institutional capacity of districts of this type, if more modestly.

For example, the development of new, more rigorous accountability systems along with the closely related redirection of school reform toward systemic change could be especially beneficial in the future. The renewed ferment in state school finance provides additional grounds for optimism. The increasing use of an adequacy criterion in litigation assessing the constitutionality of state finance programs as well as growing support for "opportunity-to-learn" standards clearly hold promise for addressing documented disparities in the fiscal and programming capacities of many of the nation's rural districts.

Similarly, the renewed interest in collaboration should also assist rural systems in acquiring the institutional capacity to respond to the growing pressures on public education. Rural districts in many states have long benefited from the instructional and management support services offered by regional educational service agencies that operate in nearly one half of the states. The core services of most of these organizations consists of programs and services for handicapped children, staff development, curriculum development, cooperative purchasing, and other management support services that allow rural districts in their service region to offer higher quality programs with greater efficiency. The push toward collaboration between post-secondary institutions and schools should additionally benefit the staff development and curriculum development efforts of rural schools.

Without question, the move toward the creation of a national education technology policy also represents a

major development in the field that is of great significance to rural interests who, arguably, stand to benefit the most. The expectation is that a national education technology policy would put education in the center rather than on the sidelines of the current debates surrounding the use of transmission standards and the funding, acquisition, and use of the tools of transmission (Stephens & Ross, 1992). The potential that technology holds for enriching the curricular offerings of rural small schools in particular seems irrefutable.

Though more limited in the scope of their projected impact, two additional developments also hold promise for rural interests. Interest in the diversity of the public school universe and advances in the tools and techniques to better understand this diversity should result in raising the level of debate about the condition of the huge public school enterprise in this country. More accurate characterizations of this universe should lead to more equitable, adequate, responsive, and appropriate education policies. Rural interests have been handicapped in the past by arguing that education policies, federal ones in particular, have an urban bias; that rural districts do not receive an equitable share of funds; and that the federal government is not responsive to their needs in other ways. The recent advances that enhance the federal government's ability to provide meaningful descriptions of the public school universe will be beneficial in resolving issues of this type.

Only 2 of the 14 recent developments represent serious challenges for rural education. Both would insert market forces into public education: the accelerated support for parental choice options and the privatization movement. While the choice movement at present does not appear to be a significant issue in many rural regions, this could change, especially if the school choice movement is coupled with the privatization movement.

#### Concluding Comments

A fairly large number of significant developments in education were either initiated or acquired new significance during the past 5 years. Rural education interests should benefit in a number of important ways as a result of these developments; a number of the traditional, seemingly intractable, problems threatening the institutional capacity of rural districts are now amenable to resolution. It is, of course, difficult to say with certainty what the final outcome of the fourteen developments will be. Should even a small number of the impact assessments eventually be realized, rural systems could make still more important contributions to the national priority of creating a high-quality public school system across the land.

Table 2  
*Hypothesized Impact of Developments on Rural Systems*

Development	Hypothesized Impact on Institutional Capacity			Subsystem(s) Primarily Impacted					
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Govern- ance	Instruc- tional	Staffing	Student	Financial	Comm. Support
1. profound shift in locus of control for policy development	minor			X	X				
2. reaffirmation of national interest in education	moderate			X	X		X		
3. new, more rigorous accountability	major			X	X	X	X	X	
4. redirection of school reform movement	major				X	X	X	X	X
5. new interest in restructuring governance	minor			X	X				
6. renewed interest in collaboration	major			X	X		X	X	X
7. accelerated support for parental choice options		major		X	X	X	X	X	X
8. growing support for privatization		major			X	X	X	X	X
9. renewed ferment in state school finance	major				X	X	X	X	X
10. beginnings of a national education technology policy	major				X	X	X	X	X
11. growing diversity in school-age population		minor			X			X	
12. new interest in geographic diversity of public schools universe	moderate					X	X	X	
13. major advances in policy analysis tools	moderate				X	X	X	X	
14. unrest with instructional practices		minor			X				

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